

Contents

<u>Title Page</u> <u>Copyright</u> **Dedication** 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 <u>10</u> <u>11</u> <u>12</u> <u>13</u> <u>14</u> <u>15</u>

<u>16</u>

- <u>17</u>
- <u>18</u>
- <u>19</u>
- <u>20</u>
- <u>21</u>
- <u>22</u>
- <u>23</u>
- <u>24</u>
- <u>25</u>
- <u>26</u>
- <u>27</u>
- <u>28</u>

To My Readers

Also By

To Betray a King Preview

Acknowledgements

About the Author



Annette K. Larsen

Copyright © 2024 Annette K. Larsen and Hidden Falls Publishing.

All rights reserved.

ISBN: 9798883127877

Cover design by Karri Klawiter. <u>Artbykarri.com</u> Edited by Jana Miller. <u>The-writers-assistant.com</u>

To anyone who has ever felt unwanted.

I promise, there are people out there who want you.

Even if they can't say it.

Even if they can't show it.

Now

February 21st, Century of the Lion, Year 87 Sovereign Duchy of Winberg Roslyn, Seventeen years old

The fine fabric of my dress rustled as I hurried through the palace corridors, desperate to get to the solitude of my chambers. I shoved my way through the heavy door of my room and shut it firmly. The paper crinkled in my fist as I leaned back against my door, taking short, shallow breaths, gasping around my panicked tears. The housekeeper had handed me the missive a few minutes prior, explaining that a delegation from Saldine would be arriving at the palace next week, and the duke and duchess might not be here to greet them.

"Surely Their Graces will return in time," I had said to the housekeeper, desperate for it to be true.

"I truly hope so. Messages have been sent with our fastest riders, but whether or not they return in time, there are decisions to be made now. We must prepare. Rooms and meals must be planned. Entertainment must be decided upon. A delegation of our own must be formed."

"That cannot be my responsibility," I said in desperation.

She had waved her hand through the air. "Of course not. The duke's advisors will organize that, but I will need your help with the rest of it. And if—heaven forbid—Their Graces do not return in time, you will need to be prepared to take on the role of hostess in the duchess's place."

My response had been immediate and visceral. My insides had started to tear themselves apart as my panic rose. It built and expanded in my stomach and chest until I knew there would be no stopping it.

I had managed only a few moments of conversation with the housekeeper before I mumbled an excuse and raced back to my room. A delegation from my home kingdom would mean that high-ranking officials would come here, to Winberg Palace.

That could not happen. I'd fled from Saldine to protect myself, but I would not be safe if an entire delegation discovered my whereabouts. The duke and duchess *would* return in time. They had to.

Four years ago, when I'd been sent to live with my cousin, Lisette, and her father in Winberg, I'd believed I would be biding my time in the countryside, safe and anonymous. And I had, for several years, but one visit to the capital of Winhaven and one royal celebration had changed that. Lisette had caught the eye of Lord Edmund Rockwell, the future sovereign duke of Winberg. No lady in her right mind would refuse a marriage proposal from him, so they had married. When Lisette had begged me to come with her as her cousin and dear friend, I'd said yes. My uncle was kind, but staying with only him in that country house held no appeal. Lisette was my one true friend, the only one who knew my story. So I had come with her.

How foolish that seemed now. If I had stayed in the country, I would not be facing the possibility of running into those who wanted me dead.

Who would be part of the Saldian delegation? How big would it be? Would it only be advisors of King Terius, or would one of the earls come? Or one of their sons?

I pinched my eyes against the memories that assaulted me. Neil stepping on my toes when I was nine years old. Nina dipping the ends of my hair in ink and staining my dress when I was eleven. Everett pulling my hair. Neil calling me a gutterling and kicking dirt at me. Me crying to my parents.

"I'm sorry, my love. Children can be cruel sometimes," they'd always said.

I shook my head and looked around the room, trying to concentrate on what was here and now so that I wouldn't spiral down to the very worst memories.

I focused my anger toward the citizens of Murrwood. If they had not created some sort of upheaval, then the duke and duchess would not be gone at this very moment. Their Graces had felt the need to attend to the situation in Murrwood themselves, taking Lord Edmund and Lisette with them. If they returned before the Saldian delegation arrived, I could keep out of the way and even hide in my room, pretending to be sick until the delegation was gone. But what if they didn't return in time? The duke and

duchess had been gone for several weeks, and though there was a good chance that they would return in time—what if they didn't?

The whole point of going to live with Uncle Richard and Lisette was so that I would never be put in this position. Of course, I hadn't expected my cousin to marry the heir to the Sovereign Duchy of Winberg, and my stay with her was supposed to have been short-lived as I waited for King Terius and his queen to have another child.

We had hoped at first that I'd be able to return soon. The crown prince was still frail, but he had not succumbed to the fever that had swept through our kingdom, and the queen had become pregnant less than a year after I fled Saldine. I'd truly believed that she would bear another healthy heir to the throne and that I'd be able to return home before my sixteenth birthday.

But the fever had claimed the queen and her baby.

King Terius was left alone, having only one son with a weak constitution that everyone believed would kill him before he reached adulthood.

That meant that if the king and his son died, I would inherit the Saldian throne.

Before

December 9th, Century of the Lion, year 83 Kingdom of Saldine Roslyn, Thirteen years old

The moment Uncle Richard and Lisette showed up at our home, I knew something was wrong. Uncle Richard pulled my parents aside right there in the entry and began a hushed conversation that he clearly didn't want Lisette and me hearing.

I beckoned to Lisette, and instead of going to my chambers, I led the way to the library. "But this is where they always come to talk," she said as I tugged her past the shelves and toward the windows.

"Exactly," I answered, and pulled back the heavy drapes. "My parents won't tell me what's going on, and I want to know. Don't you?"

"Yes," she said with a sigh and climbed up onto the windowsill.

I quickly followed and we closed the drapes, hiding ourselves from view. It was mid-afternoon, so the sunlight coming through the window made it impossible for Lisette to hide her sadness. Aunt Selina, my father's sister, was Lisette's stepmother, but she had raised Lisette since she was a small

child. She was the only mother Lisette had ever known, and she had died less than two weeks ago. "Do you miss her?" I asked.

Tears quickly pooled in her eyes and slid down her face as she nodded. "I think father is taking us back to Winberg."

My heart sank. "But why?" I asked.

"The manor here belongs to the estate. And since Mama Selina had no children of her own, the property reverts to the Crown."

I was used to Lisette being gone for long periods of time. Aunt Selina and Uncle Richard maintained two estates. The one here in Saldine, and the one that Uncle Richard had inherited in Winberg. But now...

"Are you ever going to come back?" I asked, terrified of the answer. Her shrug was sad. "I don't know."

"But—" I cut myself off when we heard our parents coming down the corridor.

They came into the library and shut the door as usual.

"The queen came to you? Here?" Uncle Richard's voice asked, incredulous.

"Yes. To warn us. It was only rumors," my father answered. "She said the guards could find nothing concrete, but it makes sense."

"She's only a child," Uncle Richard pointed out.

"And yet she stands between the earls and the throne."

"This is my fault, Malcolm," my mother said suddenly. "It's because of me this is happening."

My mother's voice cracked with tears, and I wanted to lean closer, but the heavy drapes didn't allow any movement, not if I wanted to stay hidden. So instead I just looked to Lisette, who seemed just as confused as I was.

"This is their problem, not ours," my father insisted. "You bear no fault."

"No fault?" she whisper-screamed, incredulous. "If you had married someone of noble birth, they would not be doing this."

"Maybe. Or maybe your birth is just a convenient way to excuse their treachery. You are no more at fault in this than Selina is."

"He's right," Uncle Richard said. "Blaming you two for marrying unequally is just as ridiculous as blaming Selina for dying. It's the same result. It puts Roslyn too close to inheriting."

"But this? To want to hurt a thirteen-year-old girl?"

I watched Lisette's eyes widen and felt mine do the same. *They wanted to hurt me? Who? WHY?*

"What can we do, Malcolm?" my mother asked. "How can we protect her from this?"

There was a long silence. "I think we have to send her away." My father's voice was wooden.

Suddenly I couldn't breathe.

"What? Where?" my mother demanded.

"Richard?" my father said, sounding desperate. "You are going back to Winberg?"

I heard a sigh. "I don't have a choice. Without Selina, we have no home here."

"When do you go?"

"Soon. Within a fortnight. King Terius has given me more time than that, but why delay? There is nothing for me here without my wife." His voice choked off, and I looked over to see tears sliding down Lisette's cheeks. She had a hand pressed over her mouth, trying to smother her grief.

I couldn't stand not seeing what was going on anymore, so I moved carefully and parted the drapes just enough that I could see into the room with one eye.

My mother was crumpled on a couch. Both my father and my uncle stood, looking tired and defeated. My father opened and closed his hands, then licked his lips before fixing his eyes on Richard. "Will you take Roslyn with you?"

"No," my mother protested, bursting to her feet. "We can't."

My father put his hands on her shoulders, trying to comfort her. "What choice do we have? Prince Marcos is already ill. The fever wiped out the rest of the royal family. If King Terius and Marcos both succumb, Roslyn is the next in line, and the earls won't stand for it."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

All three adults turned to look at me in surprise.

My hands had parted the drapes without my permission. My mouth had asked the question even though my mind was so shocked that coherent words felt impossible.

"Rose." My mother's tears increased. "I'm so sorry."

"You're sending me away?" My own voice sounded wooden and hollow as I asked, desperate for them to deny it.

"Come here, Rose." My mother beckoned, scooting to one side of the couch and patting the seat beside her.

"Come, Lisette," Uncle Richard said.

I looked back and saw that Lisette had come out of hiding as well. She looked as pale as I felt, but she went to her father. "Let's let them talk," he said as he led her from the room.

I went to my mother's side and leaned into her warmth as she wrapped her arms around me.

"You know how we've talked about our position in society?"

"Yes." Aside from the royal family, my father was the highest-ranking duke.

My mother's arms tightened around me. "Well, there have been... rumors."

I frowned, waiting for her to explain.

"With the death of the king's brothers, your father became the next in line after Prince Marcos."

"Yes, but he cannot inherit." I'd always known that. Since marrying a commoner, my father was now prohibited from inheriting the crown.

"Yes, so then the next in line was your Aunt Selina."

"Right."

"But now that she is dead, it would fall to you."

My breath sped up, and my eyes raced from my mother to my father, back and forth, hoping it wasn't true. "But...if father cannot, then why?" Logically, I knew all the answers; we had discussed the situation before. But that had all been in theory. Facing it as a reality now brought up all the questions I should have thought to ask before.

"I am the one who cannot rule," my mother said. "Your father inheriting would mean putting a commoner on the throne, and that is unlawful. But you...you are noble enough that you could still legally inherit.

Unfortunately, there are some—" She swallowed. "There are some—" Her voice broke off again and she looked to my father.

He pulled over a stool so he could sit right in front of us and caught my gaze. His expression was stoic, but something in it terrified me. "Rose, some believe that it would be better if you weren't in the line of succession at all."

My chin pulled back. I didn't like the sound of that, especially after they'd talked about people wanting to hurt me, and my concern doubled when I looked to my mother and saw her chin quiver.

"Roslyn, there have been threats against you," my father said.

My face went numb. "What kind of threats?"

"Some people believe so strongly that you are unworthy, that I fear they may try to take your life."

There was a buzzing in my head that was making everything fuzzy. I could feel it in my temples and along my jaw as I tried to line up all the words they had said and force them to make sense. "Just because mother wasn't nobility when you married her?" I asked.

He gave a nod, his nostrils flared. "Some people's prejudice runs deep." "Who?" I demanded as a simmering rage rose up inside my small body. The thought of anyone forcing me away from my home filled me with such righteous indignation that, in my thirteen-year-old mind, it almost pushed out the terror of hearing that someone wanted me dead. "Who is it? Is it the king? Is it the lawmakers?" I asked, even though I knew the answer.

"The earls."

The rage that had animated my movements suddenly washed out of me in one great wave, leaving me cold and unsteady. "The earls?" My father's cousins. My mind churned, trying to make sense of it. "Because if I were to die, then the crown would pass to Lord Malladon."

"Yes."

It made sense, at least in a strictly factual way. I just didn't understand why they made me suffer for it.

"The earls want me dead?" I asked in a whisper.

My mother nodded. Though her face was fierce and confident, a slow stream of tears ran down her cheeks. "Their dislike of you seems to have only grown in the last few years, since so many members of the royal family have perished."

"Is that why their children treat me the way they do?" Pushing me into fountains. Twisting my arm. Locking me in closets.

She nodded. "I think the earls taught their children not to accept you."

I pulled my hand from hers, as if I'd been burned. "But..." My eyes darted from her to my father and back again. "They don't truly want to hurt me. They tease, but..." That's what everyone had always told me. Our fathers were cousins. We were family. Everett and Neil and Nina and all their siblings were just immature. They teased. They were playing. Sometimes they scared me or hurt me, and I hated it, but I put up with it because my parents and every other adult had excused it. I'd accepted it as

just the way it would always be, and I'd done my best to make myself smaller in the hopes that they wouldn't be bothered by me.

"That's what we believed." She reached for me again, pulling me back into her protective embrace. "It's what we wanted to be true. And maybe those children really are teasing. But their fathers...I'm sorry, sweetheart, but Malladon and Ravenna—we're afraid of what they might do to ensure that the throne never falls to you."

"How do you know they want to hurt me?"

"The queen sent one of her guards to warn us."

My brow furrowed. "If the queen knows, then why doesn't she do something about it?"

"They don't talk about it outright. They use code words so as not to incriminate themselves. They speak about 'cutting the thorns from the rose.' The queen and her guards are certain they're talking about you, but they can't prove it. Not yet. There's no fixed plan in place, it's just rantings and what-ifs."

A tear slid down my face, even as my mother's arms tightened around me. I was trembling, my mind churning but unable to hold on to any reason or logic.

"Why do they hate me?" I whispered.

My father scooted closer and grabbed my hand. "They hate the power you hold, but they don't hate who you really are," he said as if that should be some sort of consolation.

I shot to my feet, pulling away from both of my parents. "What difference does it make?" I asked, tears rolling down my cheeks. "They want me dead!"

"It's despicable, I know," he said, his lips pressed so tightly that they were turning white. His jaw clenched and his hands shook. "It's not right and it's not fair and you don't deserve any of it. But it is happening, and we must act to protect you," he said.

I turned to my mother. "So I have to go?"

She stood and came to me, cupping her hands over my cheeks. She looked to my father, then closed her eyes in resignation. "I think it's best."

"But...I'm not—" I shook my head viciously, hating the tears that crowded my eyes. "I didn't do anything wrong!" I sobbed.

"I know, Rosie," she said, kissing my forehead. "I know. This is not your fault and you should not carry this burden, but we can't control the greed of

others."

"So...do I have to leave forever?"

"No, of course not!" she said, and then I watched her face fall. "At least, I hope not."

"You hope?" That was the only assurance she could give me? Hope? "You mean I might never come back?"

She shook her head. "As soon as the queen has another child, it should be safe for you to return. But right now, the possibility of you inheriting is too real, and the earls don't like it. If King Terius's child does not inherit, they want to be sure one of them does."

My mind raced with questions, and they came spilling out of my mouth in a panic. "What if Prince Marcos does die? And what if Queen Talia doesn't have a child, and what if King Terius dies?"

She took a shuddering breath. "Then we will bring you back for your coronation, and you'll have the protection of the royal guard."

My eyes burned. "I don't want to be queen."

"And I don't think you will be." She squeezed my hand hard. "I don't believe it will come to that. But until there is more than just an ill child standing between you and the throne, the temptation to get rid of you will be too great."

Get rid of me. Such a funny way to phrase it.

Kill me. That's what she meant.

There were people who wanted me to die...simply because I existed. And I knew them. They weren't strangers. I had grown up with these men, played with their children. "Can't I just tell them no?"

"What do you mean, love?"

"Can't I tell the king I don't want it? Couldn't he just say that I wasn't allowed to inherit?" That would work, wouldn't it? If I couldn't be queen, they wouldn't need to kill me.

But my mother was already shaking her head. "I'm sorry, but—" She started crying again.

My father placed his hand on my arm. "I tried that. I went to King Terius and told him he could strip our entire family of all of our titles. But he refused."

My heart sank. "But why?"

"He said it was unlawful." His eyes looked so sad. "Only you can make that request for yourself, once you come of age."

My mother's face went white as she looked to my father. "That's not for seven years," she lamented.

I looked back at my mother, missing her already but feeling resigned. "So I have to go live with Lisette?"

My mother managed to pull herself together and offer me a little smile. "You like Lisette."

Of course I did, but leaving Saldine and going to live with Uncle Richard and Lisette in Winberg was terrifying.

More terrifying than staying here and fearing for my life? Perhaps not. This was a different kind of terrifying. I just wanted to stay here in my home, where I didn't feel like an intruder and a burden.

"Can you come with me?" I asked my mother.

She looked to my father, but he was shaking his head, so she pulled me into her arms, cradling me. "I could be recognized. We can't risk that, and we can't take the chance that someone will follow me to you." She sobbed, making my body shake along with hers.

"This isn't fair."

"You're right. Nothing about this is fair."

That was the moment the ache really started. Knowing I was hated and hunted left a throbbing pain in my shoulder. It hurt my head and launched through my chest. So many pains caused by so many wounds. To be hated was bad enough, but to be torn from my parents because of it broke my heart. And that was a pain I might never be able to heal.

Now

The pain came rearing back as I faced the possibility of one of the earls walking the halls of the Winberg palace and discovering that I was here.

After my aunt died and the threat against me became known, I had resigned myself to living my life with Lisette for a time. Now, four years had gone by. Four years and two months since I'd left my childhood home, my parents.

If only Edmund hadn't chosen Lisette. Of course, I'd known when I'd come to live at the palace a year ago that running across the occasional foreign delegate was a possibility, but I'd done my best to make myself unobtrusive and forgettable. I was Miss Rose here instead of Lady Roslyn. And as such, no one need take note of me.

Now I had to contemplate the real possibility that I'd be discovered and recognized by the very people I had fled from. If only Lisette hadn't had to go away.

I was so close to being able to go home. When the fever had claimed the life of the queen four years ago, I'd feared I'd never be able to return, but then King Terius had remarried six months ago, and everyone was anxious for news of an impending birth. Most especially me. But if I was discovered here before a healthy child was born...

I forced my breathing to slow and dried my tears. My mother's words came to me, reminding me to let it go. Even if there was reason for fear, we had to let it out, otherwise our bodies would hold on to it. So I blew the fear out of my lungs and shook it from my hands, hoping it would not cling to me.

Pulling myself together was vital so that I could set things in order. It was important that I move forward if I hoped to get through this mess.

I crossed to my window and looked down at the gardens, wishing I could walk through them and let the sunshine and flowers calm me.

A bird landed on the ledge for just a moment. "What do you think, miss?" I inquired of the bird. "Am I a fool for coming here with Lisette?" It was something I'd started doing years ago. When I'd given up on having friends, I'd started confiding in animals instead. They were excellent listeners, and they never betrayed my trust.

The bird flitted away, and I sighed. "Surely they will return in time." I had to believe that. Even if they hadn't planned to return, they would get the letter about the delegation and rush home. They would.

They would.

Roslyn

Ever since receiving news of the delegation, I'd been nervous and paranoid. I still did my best to remain unnoticed, but my agitation must have shown, because I received many inquiries from servants asking if I was unwell.

Yes, I was unwell. But I never told them that.

It had been four days of waiting and worrying. I'd finally taken myself out to the gardens, hoping that the smell of flowers and a conversation with a few birds would ease some of my worry. Instead, the curious stares that followed my movements reminded me of all the reasons I needed to stay hidden, so I went back inside.

I crossed the great hall and had almost reached the stairs when a maid approached. "Miss Rose." She dipped a curtsey. "This is for you." She held out a letter, sealed with wax.

"Thank you," I said.

She nodded in deference before hurrying away.

I stared at the crest stamped into the wax seal. Lisette! I grabbed up fistfuls of skirt, hurried up to my room and shut the door before breaking the seal.

Dearest Roslyn,

We received news of the delegation, and the duke and duchess will return right away. However, Edmund and I must stay here. Believe me, this is not what I would have chosen for myself or you, but the duchess demands it. She wishes for Edmund to repair relationships and the sovereign reputation with the people here in Murrwood. I don't know how long she wishes us to live here, but the time could be significant. Regardless, you must come to Murrwood. Firstly, because I cannot do without you, and more importantly, we cannot have you staying there while the delegation is present. The duke

and duchess will arrive the day before the delegation is set to be there, so pack up your things and be ready to go as soon as Their Graces arrive. They've told the coachman that he will only get one night's sleep before he must bring you back to me. I'll admit, I did have to put on a bit of a dramatic show to get them to agree to it, but I'd do anything to keep you safe.

The servants will help pack whatever you need, and I've sent a list of my own things to be brought (since I did NOT anticipate a complete removal to another home when I left the palace) and Edmund's too. Please join me here. Bring anything you need to be comfortable. Hopefully you and I will be able to find some amusement here with this strange situation.

Your loving cousin,

Lisette

Lady Rockwell

I heaved a huge sigh of relief at the news. The duke and duchess would return in time, and I could be gone before the Saldian delegation arrived. Though the timeline still made me nervous.

Two days. The Saldian delegation was set to arrive in two days, and Their Graces would arrive less than a day prior.

Better than a day late, I reminded myself and immediately called for Everly so we could start packing my things. I'd be more than happy to leave this place behind and settle into a new home alongside my cousin.

By the end of the day, all the arrangements had been made. Additional trunks had been packed with Lisette's and Edmund's things, and Everly had her own trunk of belongings set alongside mine. I went to bed hopeful and woke up the next morning full of nervous anticipation coupled with a healthy dose of fear.

I spent most of the day in my room, trying to distract myself with embroidery and drawing, but my gaze was invariably pulled to my window. The duke and duchess were not supposed to arrive until this evening, but my foolish heart jumped every time I thought I heard a carriage.

By mid-afternoon, I'd resigned myself to sitting right by the window with my eyes on the horizon, willing them to appear. This day was going on forever.

The weight that dropped from my shoulders when I did see the carriage rumbling toward the palace nearly made my knees buckle. They were back.

I slumped into the chair beside the window, my hand going to my heart as my eyes stung with tears of relief. Until that moment, I hadn't realized just how terrified I was, but now the duke and duchess had returned, and I would be free to go to Murrwood and disappear into the countryside.

I stood and looked out once again, pressing closer to the window panes, thrilled when the carriage came to a stop.

But then another carriage came rumbling into the courtyard behind the first, and I finally paid attention enough to see the crest on the door as the four ink-black horses brought the second carriage to a stop.

Saldine.

No.

The delegation had arrived a day early.

I stood there at the window, my breath shallow, my face slack. What now, what now?

A commotion rose up from the courtyard as grooms came out to take over the horses, and servants rushed out to meet the early arrivals. Then the commotion seemed to expand and travel. A frantic energy filled the castle, and footsteps pounded down corridors and on stairs.

"Miss Rose!"

The shout ringing through the corridor outside my chamber was enough to shake me from my fear-induced haze. I ran to the other side of the room, threw open the doors to my wardrobe and climbed inside, crouching among my dresses and pulling the doors closed in front of me just before a loud knock and a "Miss Rose!" sounded at my door. They pounded one more time before the hinges squeaked.

"Miss Rose?" It was the housekeeper, and she sounded frantic.

I felt for her, I really did, but not enough to reveal myself.

"Miss Rose, where are you?" The pitch of her voice went up even more, then she let out a frustrated grumble. "What kind of inconsiderate, high-and-mighty nobles show up an entire day early without any warning?" Her heels clicked across the stone floor as she crossed back to the door. "It's reprehensible, that's what it is. What do they—"

The door shut on the rest of her words.

I waited in the cramped darkness of the wardrobe for several more minutes, wanting to be certain no one else would come barging in to look for me. Then I carefully unfolded myself and climbed out of the large piece of furniture and looked around furtively. What now? I couldn't stay here.

They would continue to look for me, and my room would be anyone's first guess. I had to find a better hiding place. The only place that was close enough and that I thought would be left undisturbed was the armory, so I snuck my way down the hall and was barely able to pull open the huge and heavy door and slip inside. There was just enough light filtering in from small slotted windows high on the walls that I could make my way to the far corner and sit behind a heavy wooden table that held an assortment of knives.

It was cold in here and the ground was uncomfortable, but I was grateful to be secreted there in the quiet with only the unfamiliar and intimidating weapons surrounding me. At least I knew that no members of a foreign delegation would be allowed in this room.

After more than two hours, the occasional sound of a servant shouting my name had stopped. They seemed to have given up on finding me and were no doubt focusing on getting the delegation settled and fed while having no real host to welcome and entertain them.

It had been quiet in this corner of the castle for some time when the rise of voices and the pounding of footsteps resumed. My heart rate picked up and I listened closely, trying to determine what had caused the ruckus. A deep and shuddering sigh released from my chest when I recognized the sounds of the duke and duchess being greeted by the servants.

They were back. *Finally*. And if I could just stay hidden until nightfall, then I should be able to make my escape in the morning and leave all of this behind.

I fell asleep, which was surprising considering I was lying on a cold stone floor, but worry had worn me out and boredom eventually lulled me into sleeping with my head resting on one arm and my knees pulled to my chest. I woke up shivering and took my time climbing to my feet and doing my best to regain the feeling in my aching limbs. The little bit of light in the room had faded. Was it dusk? No, the light was more silver than orange. Moonlight. How many hours had passed? My stomach had an empty feeling that spoke of hunger and nerves.

My stiff legs shuffled along as I crossed to the door and then pushed on it. It cracked open, revealing the hallway that was lit only by the lowest-burning lamps. I shut the door quietly and kept to the shadows as I headed toward my chamber.

I hugged my shivering arms to my chest, anxious to climb into my warm bed.

"Excuse me, miss."

I let out a startled cry, turning to face the voice as one hand flew to cover my heart and the other slapped over my mouth, preventing any further noise.

"I'm so sorry," the man said. He stood ten paces ahead of me and was holding out an apologetic hand. "I didn't mean to startle you, but I seem to be turned around." His chuckle was self-deprecating.

It was dim enough in the corridor that I could not make out his features, for which I was extremely grateful. If I could not see him, then he could not see me. I forced a swallow even as my heart raced. "What can I do for you, sir?" I asked as I tried to ignore the uncomfortable feeling that I recognized his voice.

"I am looking for the blue room in the east corridor."

I dug my thumb into the palm of my other hand in an attempt to keep my wits about me. "Of course. If you continue this way," I said, pointing behind me, "and turn right at the end of the corridor, it will be the fourth door on your left."

"Thank you very much, miss."

I curtsied, hoping he might think I was a servant, and stepped to the side to allow him to pass, keeping my face down until he was gone, then letting out a huge sigh once he was out of sight.

I made it to my chamber without further incident and met a frantic Everly. "We looked and looked for you. I nearly told the duke that you were missing, but he was so busy with the delegation—"

"You didn't, did you?" I asked, grabbing on to her arm.

She looked confused. "No, but I should have."

"You did the right thing. I was fine."

"Are you certain, miss?"

"You and I get to start our new adventure tomorrow." I forced cheer into my voice, hoping to distract her. "Everything is wonderful."

She didn't look convinced, but she didn't argue with me either.

As I settled in for my last night of sleep at the castle, I thought of all the possibilities that lay before me. A quiet life in the country. Distance from the duke and duchess. A place to hopefully be myself while I waited and hoped for good news from my parents.

And good news was possible, I reminded myself. King Terius just needed another child. Was that too much to ask?

It was so much warmer here in the southern part of Winberg. It had been a bit of a shock to come down out of the mountains and find spring already upon the land in the first week of March. Surprising and glorious. Saldine wasn't mountainous, so the harsher weather in Winhaven had never been to my liking.

The journey had been mostly silent, though once in a while I was able to draw my maid, Everly, into conversation.

The carriage rolled through the village of Murrwood, which was much smaller than Winhaven, of course, but seemed to have all the necessities on High Street. Baker, cobbler, tailer, apothecary... The road leading from the village to Bridgefield Manor was surrounded by tall trees, dressed in their new bright-green growth.

We pulled up to the house and I was surprised not only by its size, but by the fact that the two wings of the manor looked so different. It seemed the original house had been deemed too small and so an entirely new wing had been added on long after the original house had started showing its age.

The wheels rumbled to a stop, and I forced myself to be patient and wait for the footman to open the door. Something about the utter imperfection of this place called to me. The palace and grounds in Winhaven were exquisite and vibrant, and filled with some of the most beautiful flower gardens I could have imagined, but they'd always felt like a facade. This place looked like it held both joy and pain. Sorrow and loss.

The carriage door was pulled open, and I set my gloved hand in that of the footman and climbed down, careful to keep my royal-blue skirt from getting under my feet.

I eagerly entered when the butler pulled the door open, immediately taken by the way the dark wood gleamed in the sunlight pouring through the windows.

I allowed the butler to take my cloak and gloves as I continued to gawk. "Ah. Rose."

I looked toward the sound of Edmund's bored tones. He was coming down the corridor, a number of papers in one hand and a goblet in the other.

"Lord Rockwell," I said, sinking into a respectful curtsey.

"It's good you're here. I'm certain Lisette could use the company." He nodded vaguely toward the stairs, which I assumed meant that Lisette was upstairs, before continuing on to a sitting room that was situated to my right. He said nothing more, only kicked the door closed.

I gave a little shake of my head, wondering for the thousandth time why he never kept his wife company if he knew she needed it. But that was not Edmund's way. It never had been.

"You've arrived!" Lisette's voice sang out from above me. She was making her way down the staircase, looking as lovely as ever, but with clear lines of stress around her eyes.

She reached the entryway and I happily embraced her.

"I'm so glad you've come," she said, lingering over the hug for longer than was usual. I immediately started to worry.

"Are you well?" I asked as I pulled back.

Instead of answering, she just grabbed my hand and pulled me toward the stairs. "Come. I'll show you your room. Tessa, will you bring tea up to Miss Rose's room?"

The maid scurried off to comply, and I followed Lisette up the stairs, my eyes darting around as I did so, admiring the paintings hanging on the walls and the decorative woodwork that arched over the windows.

The servants were quick to bring up my trunks, and Tessa arrived with tea just as the last of my luggage was being deposited. Lisette thanked the servants and encouraged them to be on their way, so it wasn't long before we closed the door of my room and I turned my gaze on my cousin.

She smiled, though it was pinched. Instead of being blunt and telling her she looked as if she were trying to look happy while walking through a field of goatheads, I took a gentler approach.

"So, why is it that their graces have exiled you and your husband here?" She rolled her eyes at my jest. "We are not exiled."

"Fine," I conceded, opening one of my trunks. "But it doesn't sound as if you had much choice in the matter, so the question remains: Why?"

She sighed as she sank down onto a chair that sat by the window. "This estate has been a second home for the duke's family for years. They used to spend summers and holidays here. As such, they were well-known and well-respected by those who lived in the village of Murrwood."

"All right," I prompted, wondering what that had to do with anything.

"A month ago, His Grace received word that the magistrate of Murrwood was corrupt, and that there was a group of citizens who were trying to take the law into their own hands. His Grace was most displeased that such things were occurring in a part of the dukedom that had always been peaceful and that was closely tied to the family."

"Quite embarrassing," I remarked.

"Quite," she agreed. "So we came to investigate. We discovered that not only was the magistrate corrupt and stealing from the citizens here, but that the group of people trying to fight back were not grown men, but a ragtag band of teenagers and even children."

I blinked at her in shock. "Oh my." I was a teenager. Would I have had the courage to stand up to a corrupt lawman? I didn't think so.

"Yes. I believe it was quite embarrassing for the duke, to find out that things had gotten so out of hand here, even in his own house. Come sit," she said, indicating the other chair in the room.

My chin pulled back even as I crossed to the chair. "What do you mean, in his own house?"

"Some of his servants were the ones fighting back. Instead of these servants reaching out to His Grace and trusting him to remedy the situation, they believed their only recourse was to take matters into their own hands. As I said, embarrassing." She took a sip of her tea and then added some cream. "So he's tasked Edmund with finding a new magistrate and reclaiming the good reputation that the Rockwell family used to have here."

I prepared my own tea, thinking through all she'd said. As I stirred the steaming liquid, I finally looked up at her. "Is that why you look so..."

"Haggard?" she said abruptly.

"That's not what I was going to say."

"But it's true," she said with a long sigh.

"Tell me what's wrong," I prompted. Lisette had never been blissfully happy in her marriage. Edmund had married her mostly for her beauty and because his parents were impatient for an heir, so they hadn't known each other well when they wed. They still didn't know each other well, but she and Edmund got along for the most part.

She let out another tired sigh. "Edmund won't tell me everything." My brow furrowed. "Everything?"

"About his history here, about the servants who seem a little afraid of him," she said with a meaningful tip of her head and raised brow. "About

the reasons he hates this place. And he does, Rose," she said in earnest. "He *hates* it here."

"And he's making you miserable because of it?"

She shook her head and took a sip. "Not miserable, just...it's hard to be content here when he's so stormy about it."

Stormy was an interesting way to describe Edmund's darker moods. "It's a lovely place, though," I said, hoping she could see some of the potential that I already felt in my bones. "I wonder if you might end up enjoying it here," I commented.

"Why's that?"

"I know you've always found living under the duchess's watchful eye to be taxing. Perhaps this will be an opportunity to spread your wings without all of her...suggestions." Criticisms, or even rebukes would have been more accurate descriptions.

She seemed surprised by the idea. "I hadn't thought of it that way. Honestly, I've been so irked by the fact that we were essentially ordered to be here, it hadn't occurred to me that there might be benefits to this arrangement."

"It's all a matter of perspective, I suppose. I know Edmund might not be happy to be here, but that doesn't mean you can't be."

She lapsed into silent thought, and we sipped our tea.

John

I dug into the earth with my trowel, gouging and stabbing.

"Oi!" Tyson said from a few yards away. "Don't take it out on the plants."

I took a deep breath and chuckled. "Right," I said, trying to regain my good humor. There was no need for me to take out my mood on the innocent plants. It wasn't their fault that Lord Rockwell had returned.

"At least the duke and duchess didn't stay long," Tyson pointed out.

I frowned at the dirt. "It was long enough."

"Oh, come off it. The duke was downright pleasant considering the circumstances."

"I know," I said. My gratitude for the duke's mercy was immense. "You know it's not the duke I have a problem with."

"You're spoiled," Tyson teased. "The duchess acted just like I would expect her to. They are the sovereign rulers of this land, after all."

I conceded that was true as I dug more gently into the earth. We had all been spoiled by their years of absence.

Adjusting to the presence of the sovereign family had been jarring. Their arrival had been unannounced and unexpected. Lord Edmund Rockwell and his wife had arrived with his parents, the Duke and Duchess of Winberg, nearly a month ago. It was meant to only be a visit. However, the situation with Magistrate Reeve had prompted the duke and duchess to install their son here permanently to oversee things and try to mend the situation.

"Besides," Tyson continued, "the demanding duchess is gone now, so why are you so huffy?"

I grinned, appreciating the ribbing, but not wanting to explain. "No reason. I'll do my best to get my *huffiness* under control."

Tyson was right. My life here was good. I had friends, mentors, and family. I needed to get my head straight and shove down my annoyance. Whether I wanted Lord Rockwell here or not was irrelevant. I was a groundskeeper, a servant—his servant—bound to do as he bid. I tried not to allow that thought to make me bitter.

Years ago, when I was still a child, Lord Rockwell had lived here for a few months, assisting his brother's widow, Princess Marilee. At least, that's what I'd believed. In truth, he'd been gathering information, and he'd asked me to help. I'd been an eager student, and for a few weeks, he'd turned me into a novice spy, chasing after James Sutton, who lived on the neighboring estate. Sir James hadn't taken kindly to the subterfuge, and I'd been scolded for the part I'd played. I was fortunate that Lord Rockwell had not stayed in residence for long after that. The years since then had left Bridgefield mostly empty of masters and mistresses. I'd grown up alongside the other Bridgefield servants, taking care of one another and maintaining the house for the rare occasions when a member of the ducal family wished to use it.

Being left to ourselves had made us all a bit spoiled, no doubt about it. Still...

"I miss training. It's been weeks." I was used to sparring with the others regularly, almost daily. I was used to tussling with the lads and teasing the lasses. But since the duke's arrival, we'd suspended our jaunts over to Sutton Manor in favor of remaining at our posts and doing our best to ensure our continued employment. I loved my job and had every intention of showing my worth.

Tyson looked over with a knowing grin. "I'm sure we can remedy that." "Tonight?" I suggested, grateful he seemed as eager to get back to training as I was.

"Tonight," he agreed.

I'd have to send Gretchen to Sutton so that Falstone and the others would know to expect us. Perhaps a solid bout with Marcus would put me in a better frame of mind. My fingers itched to get my hands on a weapon and enjoy the challenge of a good training session.

Roslyn

It was only my first evening here and already I felt safe, safer than I had since Lisette and I had left her father's home in the countryside and moved

to Winhaven. This place allowed me to breathe. Whether that was due to the lack of curious gazes, or being surrounded by trees and color-flecked hills, it didn't matter. It all combined to allow the tight knot under my sternum to ease. I hadn't even realized the constant tension I'd been holding until some of it dissipated. Though I should have recognized it as an accumulation of my pain. Old hurts and the pain of abandonment had lodged inside of me. I carried it under my sternum and buried behind my shoulder blade. But I'd gotten used to it. I'd spent so much time covering up the terror and shoving aside the loss of my parents that it was simply part of me now. I'd tried to share those things with Lisette when I'd first gone to live with her, but I'd quickly realized she didn't understand what I meant when I said I had a story trapped under my ribs, and I'd learned not to speak of it. My mother and her family spoke of the stories in their bones as if it were common knowledge, but I'd found that the noble class scoffed at such things. That was another reason I'd learned to confide in animals. They seemed to understand everything I said. They listened to my complaints and didn't seem weighed down by them. My admissions of loneliness didn't hurt them.

Being at Bridgefield was a different kind of loneliness. Loneliness and I were old friends by now. My existence occupied this strange in-between space where I was constantly waiting to be called back home and constantly disappointed when I wasn't. It was difficult to connect with others when I couldn't tell them who I was. Still, this place called to me, and when I'd stood at my window after dinner with the moonlight beckoning for me to come out into the night, I'd felt safe doing so. I'd pulled out my darkest cloak and put on my boots, anxious to greet the stars and the cool air.

I hadn't exactly snuck out, but the fact that no one had taken notice of me as I descended the stairs and let myself out the back door felt like a triumph. I was out and about of my own accord, which was not something I had done often while living with Lisette. After leaving my parents, I'd been too frightened to be on my own. Then after we'd moved to the palace at Winhaven, I'd been surrounded by guards and curious nobility. I had longed for the chance to be outside, but my need to stay unnoticed had prohibited it.

So much of my life in the last four years had been consumed with waiting. I was always, always waiting. Waiting to hear from my mother. Waiting for news of Saldine. Waiting for the king to marry. Waiting for one

of my enemies to find me. Waiting for more threats to come. Waiting, waiting, waiting.

The act of doing nothing was emotionally exhausting. I'd been tired for a long time, and I expected that wouldn't change anytime soon.

But as I stepped out onto the veranda and into the silver moonlight that lit the stones under my feet, a small part of me felt energized. I walked to the railing and laid my hands against the cold stone. Closing my eyes and tipping my head back, I drew in the sweet scent of night.

I heard the wind weaving through the leaves, making them dance and shimmy. Crickets sang, short and sweet.

Opening my eyes, I smiled at the sight of fireflies blinking in the trees. I moved to the edge of the veranda and stepped down the stairs, walking quickly and quietly into the night, wishing in the most fanciful way that it might enfold me in its calm strength and keep me there.

I was grateful this part of the duchy wasn't as cold as Winhaven. I'd even heard that they didn't experience snow in this valley, which suited me quite well. If I was lucky, I might be able to enjoy exploring the grounds here year-round without the risk of freezing my feet off.

I hurried across the smooth, cultivated grass in the gardens. I had already wandered through the flowers earlier this afternoon. Whoever kept the gardens blooming was a master at matching not only the complementary looks of flowers, but also the complementary scents. Most people just smelled a flower and thought it was a nice smell, but I could smell the layers of the scents, and when paired well with other plants, it was like walking through heaven.

But tonight wasn't about exploring the flowers. Tonight was about enjoying the trees, so I quickened my pace, glancing behind me at the windows to be sure there was no one looking out at my odd behavior as I stepped into the shelter of the trees. I didn't go far. Though I felt welcomed by the night, I had no wish to get so far from the house that I might lose my way, so I started a slow circuit of the manor, letting the trees act as sentinels as I studied the grounds and buildings, enjoying the rich fragrance of earth.

I hadn't gone far when the sound of voices made me stop. The voices and footsteps were coming closer, so I moved quickly behind a large tree and did my best to blend in with its bark, waiting there until the voices became clearer.

"Can you blame them?" a man asked as several people walked slowly toward Bridgefield. "I wouldn't want to set foot on this property if I didn't have to."

"We're here and we're fine," said the voice of a girl. I was surprised by how young she sounded. What was she doing out and about at this hour?

My curiosity got the best of me and I risked poking my head out to get a look at the group. There were three of them. Two young men, one both tall and broad, the other less tall and more lanky, and a girl of perhaps twelve.

"Yes, but with Lord Rockwell back, none of us want to risk getting on his bad side," the lanky man pointed out. "Besides, now that Falstone has returned, it makes more sense to train at Sutton."

"I'm just glad to be training at all," said the large fellow, twirling a long staff that he'd been using as a walking stick.

"Hear, hear!" The girl pulled a wooden sword from her belt, brandishing it against the large man. When she swung it at him, he used the staff in his hand to block her assault.

"Save it for another time, Gretchen." He pushed with his staff and the girl gave up without a fuss and stuffed her sword back in her belt. "You go on," the man said, slowing his steps. "If Mama is waiting up in the kitchen, tell her I'll be in soon."

Ah, so he and the girl were siblings.

The girl turned immediately to the other man. "Race you," she said and immediately set off at a run.

"Cheat," the young man said like it was a curse and set off after her.

I smiled at the camaraderie. Then I turned my gaze back to the larger man and froze. It was too dark to see where he was looking, but he was definitely facing toward me. I pulled back so I was completely behind the tree again and did my best to be absolutely quiet as I listened intently, hoping I would hear the man's footsteps fade away.

They didn't. All was silent for several moments, and then his slow, quiet steps reached my ears, each one just a little closer than the last.

I tried not to be terrified. They were a jovial bunch, and they could have no reason to wish me harm, but seeing as I was alone and in the dark, it was difficult not to panic.

So much for feeling safe.

I heard two more soft footfalls, and suddenly I couldn't be still anymore. I pushed away from the tree and ran. Or tried to.

I only made it four or five steps before my toe caught on something hard. I stumbled but regained my balance, only to have my arm seized. The man spun me around and pushed me back against the nearest tree.

I couldn't help the whimper of alarm that escaped me as he crowded menacingly close.

John

An idiot, that's what I was. The body that I had trapped against the tree with my own was small, soft, and much too feminine. Gads, what had I done?

I released the startled miss immediately and backed up several steps. I was large, which was intimidating enough, but considering I'd just tripped this poor soul and shoved her against a tree, I was sure I'd terrified her. "I'm so sorry, miss. Did I injure you?"

Her breathing was ragged. "I...I...I don't think so." Her shaky voice increased my guilt.

Backing up further, I put my hands out in a placating motion. "I'm truly sorry. I thought you were a man skulking in the shadows."

She shook her head. "No, just a woman trying to avoid meeting a stranger in the dark."

Of course. She'd been trying to avoid meeting the hulking man she'd seen walking toward her from the woods. Part of me wanted to inquire further to be sure she was someone who belonged, but the other part of me knew she didn't deserve any more grief from me. "My apologies. I will leave you in peace."

"Thank you," she said in a quiet, polite way.

I took a few steps in the direction of the manor, then turned back. "Are you certain you're not injured?" Most of the time, I took great pride in my stature and strength, but this wasn't one of those times. I'd mistakenly assaulted the poor girl. All I could hope was that I hadn't scared her too horribly.

"Umm." She moved her arms and shifted her weight from side to side. "No, I'm fine."

"Good, good." I thought about offering to escort her back to the house, but I guessed that my presence would not have been a comfort. "Again, I'm so sorry." This time I forced myself to truly walk away. Though there was much more apologizing that I felt was necessary for smashing her into a tree, I thought it better just to leave her be.

Who was she though? One of the new maids brought on by Lord and Lady Rockwell? The only other woman I wouldn't recognize was the guest of Lady Lisette, but I couldn't imagine she'd be wandering the woods at night. Then again, new maids wandering the grounds didn't make much sense either.

Roslyn

The encounter with the young man last night had left me only a little shaken. Mostly I was intrigued. Where had they been coming from? I was also envious, because I didn't know if I would ever have that kind of camaraderie with anyone other than Lisette. I hoped I would, but I was seventeen and had yet to find a place where I felt wanted—where I fit. There were so few people in the world who truly knew me that it felt impossible. And if they did find out who I was, that would only make the distance greater. My own maid was always helpful, but Everly held propriety as the highest order, and I knew she'd never treat me as anything but her superior.

Lisette and I took tea together, and although I was anxious to share the strange encounter with her, I hesitated. I understood so little about what I'd seen and heard that I wanted to find out more myself before I shared the intriguing morsel with anyone else.

"Would you like to explore the third floor with me?" Lisette asked as we finished our tea.

"Of course." I was always up for exploring.

We left the sitting room behind and climbed the first set of stairs. As we started the second set I asked, "You've not been up here yet?" I was surprised that she hadn't seen an entire floor of her house after living here for a month.

She shook her head. "Edmund treats this portion of the house the same way he does the old wing."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean he won't step foot in it."

I let out a sigh. "And he still won't tell you what it is about this place that he hates?"

"Not a word."

"I'm sorry, Lisette."

She shrugged as we climbed the last few steps. "It is what it is."

What we found on the third floor was one giant corridor that had been turned into a portrait gallery. Large windows sat in tall alcoves at regular intervals, with one giant portrait occupying each stretch of wall between the alcoves. That is, if they were occupied at all. The portion of the gallery that sat at the back of the house had portraits missing in several spaces. The outlines of where those paintings had been were clearly visible. At first I thought that was because of dust, but when I looked up at the ceiling, I saw that it bore the same dark stain as the walls, darker even.

"Damage from the fire," Lisette commented from beside me, her face tilted up as she examined the walls and ceiling.

"What fire?"

"It happened five, maybe six years ago." She continued slowly down the corridor, studying the portraits that remained. "Edmund told me about it soon after we arrived. The rest of the damage has been restored and cleaned, but they didn't bother with this space. I think they were so disappointed with the loss of their ancestral portraits that repairing the walls didn't seem important."

"What caused the fire?"

"An accident."

That must have been quite an accident. "Was the family living here at the time?" This was the first time any of the family had returned to this estate since Lisette had married Edmund.

"No. This was Damian's home after he married. His widow was living here at the time of the fire."

"I didn't know Damian had been married." Edmund's younger brother had died long before Lisette ever met Edmund.

"They'd been married less than a year when he died."

"How tragic. What happened to his wife?" I asked, hoping the poor woman hadn't perished in the blaze.

"Apparently, she remarried and is living on the neighboring estate." She tilted her head to the east, in the direction of the wooded area that occupied the land between this estate and the next.

"I thought the lady of Sutton Manor was one of the Dalthian princesses." "She is."

I blinked. "And she was married to Edmund's brother before he died?" She simply nodded.

"Fascinating." And strange that the duke's family didn't claim the connection like a badge of honor. "Have you met her?"

"No, I haven't had the pleasure." Her response sounded diplomatic and completely insincere.

"Why don't you visit?"

She finally turned to me, and I saw the confusion that marred her face. "Edmund seems opposed to the idea."

"That's odd. Aren't you supposed to be improving your reputation?" She sighed a little and kept walking. "That is our stated purpose for taking up residence here."

I paused for a moment, wondering if I should stay out of it, but then I couldn't help myself. "Pardon me, but do you think ignoring the princess who lives next door will improve the citizens' opinion of you?"

She laughed. "I take your point. I'll have to broach the idea with Edmund again. I can't understand why he would wish to keep me from her. Especially since she was his sister-in-law at one point."

Once we'd traversed the entire length of the gallery, she turned to me. "It is quite gloomy."

"I suppose. Though all the windows are lovely." Yes, the blackened evidence of the fire was a bit macabre, but the little alcoves that each housed a floor-to-ceiling window were worth further consideration.

"I must go speak with the housemistress," Lisette said after a few minutes. "I believe we've hired more servants that I must meet and approve."

"A future duchess's work is never done," I commented.

"Don't remind me."

After she left, I went to investigate the view from the large windows. One side of the gallery overlooked the pristine, manicured gardens. I crossed to look out the other side and saw the wooded area that I had wandered into last night. The view from up here was quite impressive.

The trees were not so tall or so thick that they blocked the landscape. In fact, I could see large patches of ground here and there, and even caught a glimpse of a stream before the view became obscured by the distance. As I admired the view, I was distracted by movement down below me. A group of three servants were leaving the house. They walked across the side yard

and went into the woods. They walked farther and farther until it became clear that they were leaving the Bridgefield grounds. Where were they going? The Sutton Manor? If so, why?

It was a mystery, and the idea of solving that mystery appealed to me. I would have to keep an eye out for further clues in the coming days.

For now, I decided an exploratory walk was just what I needed, while there was still plenty of daylight left. While my encounter with the large man had turned out to be just a misunderstanding, it had highlighted my vulnerability and brought back my loneliness. It wasn't as though I really hid my identity; I used my real name, after all, or at least a version of it. But I left out the part where I was the daughter of the highest-ranking duke in Saldine. Lisette knew everything, but she was the only one. We hadn't even told Edmund. He knew I was from Saldine and that my parents had sent me to live with Lisette years ago, but that was all. Even as the next ruler of Winberg, Lisette hadn't wanted to entrust him with my secret. Sometimes I worried about what that meant for their future together.

Still, I did feel safer here, and though it was hard for me to feel like I fit in with people, perhaps I could at least make friends with the resident flora and fauna. Perhaps just...not at night.

The incident from last evening kept running through my head. It was a good thing I'd seen the trio joking and teasing one another as they walked through the woods. It had made the experience of being stalked by one of them much less frightening. I'd been more nervous about being caught doing something odd than about coming to any real harm. Those few seconds between running and him catching me had been the only truly terrifying moments. What stuck out more to me was the way he'd so instantly changed when he realized I was not who he had expected. He'd been apologetic, kind and concerned. His voice had been soft and anxious, even though it rumbled deeply within his chest.

I wondered if I would recognize him. Since I planned to do a good amount of exploring around the manor—in the daylight—I expected I'd run across him eventually. He might even have been one of the three people I'd seen just now. He probably was.

This afternoon, I was going to finish what I'd started last night. I hurried down the back steps, stopping only briefly to inhale the scent of lilacs that bloomed against the house, and walked far enough from the house that I could look up and get a view of the whole thing. Admittedly, it had a

somewhat dreary look, but there was also something majestic about it. Especially the old wing. And as I circled the manor and studied the old wing, I realized that the few days I'd spent here had been confined to the new wing. Had I even seen a door or corridor that led into that part of the house? I didn't think so. I knew that Edmund refused to set foot in it, but why shouldn't I?

I wove through the garden and climbed the steps that led to a thick wooden door set into the back wall of the old wing. I turned the handle and pulled, but it didn't budge. Perhaps it was old and finicky? I pulled harder to no avail and then gave up, stepping back to put my hands on my hips and glare at the unyielding portal.

"Can I help you, miss?"

I turned at the voice and found a middle-aged woman with a mop cap on her head and a basket of vegetables propped on her hip.

I folded my hands demurely in front of me and gave her a smile. "I was just wondering why this door was locked. I hoped to see this part of the house."

She smiled in understanding but shook her head. "I'm afraid this part of the house has been shut up for quite some time."

"The entire wing?"

"Yes, miss."

I craned my head around to look up at the peaked roof that loomed above me. "What a waste. Is there something wrong with it?" I asked, turning back to her.

"No. Lord Rockwell simply prefers the new wing."

"Well, thank you for letting me know. I'm Rose."

"Of course, Miss Rose," she said, dipping into a curtsey. "It's an honor to have you here at Bridgefield. My name is Jeanie. I'm the cook here."

"So I have you to thank for all the lovely meals."

She grinned, seeming very pleased at the simple compliment. "Yes, my lady. Glad they're to your liking."

"Well, I won't keep you," I said, positive that she had plans for the vegetables she was carrying that didn't involve being waylaid by me. I went down the steps. "I'm certain there is plenty more to explore."

"Of course, Miss Rose." She dipped another little curtsey and went on her way.

My eyes were drawn back to the large door that was locked tight. The disappointment I felt surprised me. Did it really matter what the other half of this manor looked like? I supposed not.

I turned away from the towering wall and looked toward the trees. I would enjoy a stroll through the woods. And if I happened to come across the servants who had mysteriously disappeared into them less than an hour ago, well then, that was all the better. I'd always felt more at ease around servants anyway. I'd never been hurt by a servant.

When I reached the stream, I nearly lost my nerve. Lisette had mentioned that the stream separated Bridgefield land from Sutton land. If I crossed it, I would be intruding on someone else's property.

I studied the stream in front of me and then looked down at my dress. There was no way that I could cross without drenching my hem.

Instead of retreating in defeat, I turned to walk along the bank of the stream. I could enjoy a walk regardless, but my eyes were also looking ahead, hoping to find a spot that was crossable. Several starlings chirped angrily at me from up in the trees. "Oh hush," I chastised. "If I am going to be living here for the foreseeable future, I have every right to explore my surroundings." It was ridiculous to defend myself to birds, but it made me feel better anyway. "I am not doing anything wrong."

A robin joined in the conversation with a much friendlier tweet than the starlings. "You see? She agrees with me," I said with a wave at the robin.

One of the starlings gave a final reprimand and then flew back to where it had come from. I smiled, amused by the conversation.

A few minutes later, I found a footpath that ran right into the stream and continued on the other side. It wasn't difficult to see why. A collection of stones had been strategically placed in the water to create an easy crossing. I bit my lip in triumph. The starlings didn't know what they were talking about. The footpath was clearly meant to be used, so I gathered my skirts and made my way from rock to rock across the stream.

I continued along the path and the trees thinned. Eventually, the steady clack of wood striking wood reached my ears. I approached tentatively, not wanting to spy or intrude, but desperately curious.

The people came into view at the same time as the manor did. Apparently, I'd walked all the way to the neighbor's home. And in a clearing between the edge of the woods and an impressive garden, a group of young people gathered. Or, mostly young people. One man, who appeared to be in charge, was demonstrating something with a sword to the four or five young people around him. A little farther off, two men were squaring off, one with a wooden staff and the other with a sword. I didn't know much about fighting, but it seemed clear that both were capable. The man wielding the staff was tall and broad. If I were to guess, I would say this young man was the one I'd encountered last night. I expected their bout to be short-lived since his sheer size alone was giving him an advantage. But as they sparred, I was impressed with how obviously well-trained the man with the sword was. I wondered if perhaps he was a soldier.

When my eyes shifted back to the group, the man in charge was having the gathering of young people thrust with their swords. As I looked on, I realized that two of the students were girls.

I remembered the little bit of conversation I'd heard in the woods. This must be what they'd meant by training. I wondered what possessed a group of servants to gather around and learn the sword?

At first, I thought perhaps it was something forced on them. But as I continued to watch, that thought faded. These young people were enjoying themselves, and my curiosity only increased.

John

Parry, attack, parry, attack, attack. The rhythm of my staff hitting against the wooden practice sword in Tyson's hands was familiar and strangely soothing. I enjoyed the work I did to improve the grounds of Bridgefield, but the training ground we'd claimed at Sutton Manor was where my heart lay. The stretch and tension of muscle, the challenge to my reflexes, trying to think three moves ahead but still react to any unexpected attack.

"Gads, John. Ease up," Tyson said as he narrowly avoided an encounter with my staff.

"Sorry," I replied, automatically taking a few steps back as I adjusted my grip on my staff. I'd been too much in my head and had gotten carried away with my attack pattern.

"You know I can't hold up as well as Marcus or Falstone," Tyson reminded me as he shook out the hand that had been holding his sword.

I pointed my staff at him. "Don't underestimate yourself."

He snorted. "I'm not. I just don't want you to forget who you're fighting and take off my head."

I grinned at him. "No guarantees." I twirled my staff in front of me, then to the side, before spinning it behind my back, all in quick succession. Then I took one step back and fell into a fighting stance. "Ready to go again?"

He rolled his eyes, not impressed by my showing off. "Give me a minute," he said and went to grab his pouch of water.

I leaned on my staff and waited for him, my eyes flicking to my surroundings. I was good at fighting, but lately Falstone had been encouraging me to be more watchful and vigilant as well. He wanted me to see the danger before it came. Prevent instead of react. "Constantly observe" was his new mantra.

And one thing that I'd observed in my continued training sessions as well as my working hours at Bridgefield was that neither Lord Rockwell nor Sir James had ventured to visit with the other in the month since Rockwell had arrived. Despite knowing each other since they were children. Despite their houses' close proximity. No one from either house had gone to visit the other. I wondered if such a visit would ever happen, or was the rift between the families too deep? Was Lord Rockwell's hate too thick? Even after several weeks of him being the master of Bridgefield, I didn't have any better sense of his character. Was he the villain that my ten-year-old self remembered? I couldn't tell.

I glanced over at Tyson to see if he was ready to get back to it, but he seemed distracted. He held his water pouch but wasn't drinking from it. I followed the direction of his gaze and saw Nellie drawing water from the well. It was a mundane chore, but the way Tyson's eyes were glued to her made it apparent that he didn't find it mundane at all. They were the same age, both fifteen, so I wasn't surprised he was noticing her.

When Nellie had finished the chore (and tossed a timid smile in our direction), she went back inside and Tyson regained his senses and wandered back in my direction. "Are you done admiring the scenery?" I asked with a grin.

"Shut it," he muttered, dipping his head. I could see him trying not to smile.

I resisted the urge to poke fun at him and instead said, in all sincerity, "She's a sweetheart."

He looked over his shoulder in the direction Nellie had disappeared. "Oh, I know it." His tone was wistful.

Ah, to be fifteen and infatuated with a pretty girl. I knew the feeling well. "Come on." I waved him closer. "Let's see what you can do."

We reengaged for another bout. This time I made sure not to attack too aggressively. It was a good workout. Tyson had started to truly fill out over the last year. He didn't have my bulk, but I could tell he was getting stronger. I was proud of him. I was proud of all my friends. We'd made a difference to the people of Murrwood.

After we'd finished, Tyson went off to spar with Ansel, and I took a break, hoping that Marcus would come join us soon. He and Falstone were Princess Marilee's personal guards and the only ones who could give me a real challenge. All the other boys were younger, and none had been training as long as I had.

As I waited, I took Falstone's advice and observed, letting my eyes scan the house with all its windows, before looking over the stables and then studying the woods.

My eyes snagged on the figure of a young woman watching us from the trees. She sat on the ground, her back leaning against a trunk. The wild grasses and flowers that grew in these woods were almost tall enough to obscure her from view. Almost, but not quite.

She was watching Lindy and Gretchen spar. I couldn't blame her. Their presence in our training sessions had become mundane for me, but I knew any outsider would find it either fascinating or scandalous. Lindy was only ten, after all.

I studied the young woman, noting the fine fabric and lovely hairdo that were at odds with her comfortable position on the ground. I knew her name was Rose, that she'd traveled here at Lisette Rockwell's request, and as far as I could tell, she was Lady Rockwell's cousin. She was younger than her ladyship, and I had yet to discover what life circumstances had brought her here. Perhaps her parents had died and she'd been put into the Rockwells' care as Lord Rockwell's ward. For her sake, I hoped that wasn't the case.

The look of awe in her eyes was intriguing, and I'd have to be blind not to notice how pretty she was, but I quickly banished any such thoughts. Women like her did not associate with men like me. I had a good life here. I had friends and a purpose. The last thing I needed was to let that life be

interrupted by a (likely spoiled) young lady who had no reason to care for the welfare of a few servants.

Roslyn

I had only meant to get a glimpse and then be on my way. Instead, I sat down right there on the ground, hopefully obscured from view, but close enough that I could watch, entranced. My eyes kept returning to the girls who fought right alongside the boys. The man in charge had them pair off and the two girls sparred with one another, their faces a combination of focus and smiles. It was clear this wasn't the first time they'd handled a sword. Not by a long shot. They were skilled. Skilled enough that when the older of the two faced off against a boy about her age, she was the one who came out the victor.

A sudden and overwhelming sense of pride washed over me. I didn't know that girl, and yet I was so proud of her. What a feeling that must be, to have the power and knowledge to protect yourself. I continued to watch, absolutely fascinated by the way the others incorporated the girls into their training so seamlessly.

What would it feel like if I could learn such a thing?

The threats to my life had become normal, almost mundane, but that didn't mean they didn't terrify me, or that they weren't constantly there at the back of my mind, ruining my peace and putting me on edge. The likelihood of anyone bothering to follow through with such threats seemed low, especially when I was so far from home, but it was also completely possible. I had barely escaped an encounter with a Saldian delegation less than a week ago. And if someone did come after me, if someone tried to abduct me or attack me, how much better off might I be if I knew how to fight back?

It was a thought that sank deep under my skin and wedged itself there.

Ever since my parents knew of the danger, I'd been running. Perhaps not actively running, but I hadn't stood my ground, and I certainly hadn't fought back. I'd fled, and I'd hid, and I'd made myself as small as possible anytime I was around high society. But certainly there was more that I could do than just running and hiding? Right?

The training continued. The two men who had been sparring engaged other partners, and the man who seemed in charge walked among them,

sometimes engaging, sometimes correcting. When the group started to disperse, the girl who had beaten her partner before, and who I was guessing was the voice I'd heard last night, ran over and challenged the man with the staff, tugging on his arm until he relented. He rolled his eyes, but smiled and got down on his knees, hobbling himself, and saluted her with his staff. Now I was certain that these two were part of the three I'd encountered last night. The young woman was quite fierce in her attack, and it looked as if it took the man some effort to keep her at bay.

A sudden wave of envy washed over me, along with a desperate wish to hold that sort of fierceness within me.

I wanted to stay and continue watching, but I knew that each minute I stayed was a minute more I was likely to be seen. As much as I wanted to understand why they trained, I also wanted to avoid the awkwardness of explaining why I was watching from the bushes. Plus, the sun was dipping below the trees at my back.

If only I had an excuse to join them. But daughters of dukes didn't go off into the woods with servants to play with swords. Especially when under the watchful eye of Lord Edmund Rockwell.

Roslyn

I'd been at Bridgefield for four days now, and each day I found more to love about it. Edmund was busy trying to clean up the mess created by the local magistrate, which left Lisette and me with plenty of time to do other things. Today we were busy rearranging the furniture and dreaming about redecorating the house. Lisette's father never allowed his house to be changed since he was too attached to the way his wife had left it, and having any input on the decor in the palace was out of the question. Duchess Hartley had no use for Lisette's input on any matter, ever.

"Do you suppose we'll actually be allowed to make changes?" I asked as we stood in the middle of the sitting room, discussing how we would need to change the drapes if we changed out the sofa.

"I don't know," Lisette answered with a wistful sigh. "I almost don't want to ask. If I ask and he says no, it will ruin all the fun. But if I just keep planning and dreaming, and never ask, well...then I'll never be disappointed." She shrugged with a sad little smile.

I frowned. "Explain to me again why you married him?"

"Don't," she said as she turned her back on me and let out a sigh.

"Don't what?"

"Don't pretend to be ignorant to my reasons. Perhaps I was not smitten with Edmund, but he was charming and kind—"

"In the beginning."

"Yes, in the beginning. And for long enough that I could not think of a good reason to refuse an offer of marriage to the future sovereign of this nation."

I pressed my lips tightly. I had no right to judge her decision.

"I was already twenty years old, and if I'd left things up to my father, I may never have had the chance to marry. So instead of aging alone and

becoming an old spinster, I am going to be a duchess."

Ruling held no appeal for me, but I understood that she didn't see it that way, and I had been unfeeling. "I know, and I'm sorry, it's just—"

"You have a pretty little idea of marital bliss in your head because your parents adore each other. But that is a rare thing, Rose, and it's foolish to hold out for such a thing."

I pulled back, surprised by the bite in her words. "Are you suggesting that I throw myself at the first man to look at me twice?"

"I'm suggesting that being married would provide you with an extra layer of protection. And I know that's something you can appreciate."

I blinked, taken aback by her words and the force with which they hit me. I'd spent so much of my time trying to protect myself by being invisible that I'd never considered the protection that a partner might provide. Yet the very thought of having a partner, of trusting someone enough that I would want to share my whole life with them, made my gut clench. Safety in loneliness was what I knew. Taking care of myself was what I knew. How could I find safety with someone else? Especially when I didn't know anyone else?

Yes, Lisette had a point, but I didn't think she realized just how impossible such a thing would be for me.

She took a deep breath and let it out in a heavy gust. "I'm sorry, Rose. I know things are far from simple for you."

I shook my head. "I'm the one who owes you an apology. I have no right to question your marriage. I just wish he treated you better, that's all."

We let the subject drop and continued to entertain ourselves by imagining elaborate decorating schemes that were completely impractical until it was time for lunch.

Edmund had not joined us for the midday meal yesterday, and I couldn't help but hope that he would miss it again today. Instead, he was at the table before either Lisette or I entered the dining room. He hadn't bothered to wait for us and was already starting to eat his meal.

"Good morning, my darling," Lisette greeted as a footman pushed her chair under her.

"Indeed" was Edmund's response. There was a letter lying to the side of his plate that held his attention.

I resisted the urge to catch Lisette's eye.

I sat and took several bites before picking up my goblet.

Edmund suddenly slammed his fist down on the table, letting out a curse and making me jump. The goblet in my hand jerked so badly that half of the wine spilled out across the table and my hand.

I stood and jumped out of the way before it was able to drip onto my lap and soil my dress.

"Foolish girl," Edmund snapped as two servants rushed forward to soak up the spill. "Must you ruin our meal with your theatrics? That was perfectly good wine you've wasted."

My heart pounded from the scare, but also from the degrading tone that Edmund had used. It reminded me too much of Everett and Neil calling me a gutterling as they twisted my arm behind my back and pushed me to the ground.

I closed my eyes and tried to calm myself. This wasn't Saldine. I was in no danger here.

"Sit, Rose."

I jumped again at Edmund's command.

"Or do you require an embossed invitation to finish your meal?"

I hurried to sit, but my hands shook.

"Edmund," Lisette said in a conciliatory tone. "I'm certain she was just startled."

I tuned them both out and focused only on finishing my food, even though what I really wanted was to run from the room. I hated that Edmund could ruin the mood so thoroughly. I hated that the ache in my shoulder started to throb at the reminder of my childhood tormentors. I hated that not only did I feel unwanted and in the way around nobility in general, but I was starting to feel that way around Edmund as well.

The moment I was finished, I excused myself and escaped out to the gardens, trying to shake off the feelings of vulnerability and fear and wishing desperately there was something I could do to banish that fear.

I thought again about the girls I'd seen learning to fight. As much as I was coming to appreciate this place, the truth was that I could never escape the well of fear that I had buried inside me. But if I knew how to defend myself, might that fear ease?

I looked off into the woods, toward Sutton Manor where I had seen the group of servants training a few days ago. Then I let my feet carry me in that direction. I found the same well-trod path I had used the other day and walked it with purpose. If they trained servants, and if they trained young

girls, then if I asked nicely, would they train me? I let myself hope, right up until I reached the break in the trees. The yard at Sutton Manor where they had trained before was empty now. My shoulders fell. I shouldn't have been surprised. Surely they didn't train every day. And even if they did, I had no idea what time they gathered. Perhaps if I kept an eye on the back gardens of Bridgefield, I might see them the next time they escaped into the woods. I had time. And despite the sudden eagerness I felt to do something to truly protect myself, I could be patient.

Disappointed but still determined, I turned back the way I'd come. This time I walked slowly, letting myself once again sink into the quiet comfort of the woods. I gathered a bundle of dark-pink flowers that matched the color of my dress and breathed them in, letting their scent calm me before focusing on each tense area of my body. I did as my mother had taught me, allowing those places to loosen as I acknowledged the hurt behind them and let them go.

The ritual worked its magic, allowing the breeze against my skin and the skittering of the leaves overhead to bring my soul back to peace.

I smiled, grateful that such a thing was possible here. What a relief it was to exist out in the open and not feel like a burden. I breathed in and out, listening for the song on the breeze. It was something I'd done with my mother when I was young. She always said the breeze held a song, and if you listened close enough, you could hear it and then join in.

I smiled at that memory and let myself begin to hum as I stooped to pick a couple more wildflowers. As I listened the way my mother had taught me, I thought I heard the breeze's song coming from farther in the woods, so I stepped off the path and decided to chase it, humming as I went.

John

It was nearing sunset, and I'd finished a full day's work. My hands were caked in dirt and my shirt stuck to my skin, so I walked to the edge of the property where the stream ran and washed up. My mother didn't appreciate it when I came into the kitchen carrying half the flowerbed with me. I scrubbed my hands and face, then took off my shirt and rinsed my arms and chest.

As I sat there on the bank, I heard the sound of someone humming. Curious, I got up and grabbed my shirt before following the sound closer to Bridgefield.

When she came into view, my legs wouldn't move and my throat felt too thick to speak. Not that I would have known what to say. Not when I was watching something so...oddly beautiful.

Miss Rose was dancing, her feet moving in a one-two-three one-two-three pattern as her arms swayed from side to side. She twirled, then wrapped an arm around a tree and circled it.

What a strange creature she was. Strange and yet...carefree. I'd seen her several times since the day I'd spotted her watching us from the trees, but I'd never seen her like this.

I'd seen her wandering the gardens and the woods a number of times. She was quiet, maybe a little shy, and kept to herself for the most part, but she always looked content when I'd seen her. Even happy sometimes. It was a bold contrast to the general feeling among all the other residents. Lord Rockwell was constantly scowling, which put the staff on edge, and his wife seemed unsure how to deal with her unpleasant husband, though she did her best to be polite to everyone.

Lady Rockwell and Miss Rose had gone into the village a couple days ago to visit the shops on High Street. The man who dropped off vegetables to the kitchen each week had spent ten minutes telling my mother all about it. The village couldn't stop buzzing about the Rockwells' arrival. I was both annoyed and grateful for their presence. Lord Rockwell was cleaning up the mess that Magistrate Reeve and his corrupt constables had left. Yes, he was doing it only because his father ordered it, but the result was the same. The people of Murrwood were safer and happier. It was a relief and I appreciated his efforts.

I'd trained with the others at Sutton twice more this week, and both times I'd kept an eye on the tree line, wondering if Miss Rose would show up to watch us again. She hadn't.

And now she was here in the woods, dancing, and I didn't know what to think of it.

When my heartbeat had quieted enough that I could hear over its pounding, I realized that she wasn't just humming, but singing to herself. It wasn't full-throated or showy. It was quiet and sweet.

Up until now, I had been under the impression that she was quiet and reserved.

She did not look quiet and reserved now.

The more I watched, the less odd she seemed. Instead she looked ethereal, like a water sprite who had stepped on land and only had a few moments to rejoice in the adventure of it. Though her dark-pink dress was fine and of the highest quality, she moved easily, unconcerned when her skirt brushed against the bark of a tree. Something inside me rose up, wanting to know how she was able to create this moment of peace and weave it into a spell that held me rooted to the ground.

I should walk away. I was intruding on her enjoyment, and if I continued to stand here, watching her like I wanted to—it would be bad form.

So I swallowed the lump in my throat and pried my feet from the ground, ducking away before she could see me. I retraced my steps to the stream and then returned to Bridgefield along the path, unsure if I would ever forget the scene I'd just witnessed, and fairly certain I didn't want to.

Roslyn

We had just finished a lovely dinner of lamb and roasted vegetables and were retiring to the sitting room where Lisette and I would discuss what else needed to be done to the house and Edmund would catch up on his correspondence. Normally, he would have gone to his study for such things, but I got the impression that the lack of other gentlemen to talk to was wearing on him. And though he did not often join in the conversations that Lisette and I had, he seemed to enjoy himself on occasion. This both confused and gladdened Lisette. Edmund liked his wife, but in Winhaven, he'd been just as content to be around anyone else as he was to be around her. He did not seem to crave her company.

As we were settling into the sitting room, I noticed the sound of a carriage approaching, unmistakable and out of place. Edmund did not like it when people showed up at Bridgefield, because there didn't seem to be anyone in Murrwood whom he liked.

I cut my eyes over to him and was unsurprised to find him scowling with his gaze on the door. The sitting room was close enough to the entry that we heard the knock, the opening of the door, and then the voices.

"Pardon me, my good man," the stranger said in a jovial tone. "I know I am unexpected, but I am here to see Lord Rockwell. Is he at home?"

"Their Graces are not receiving visitors," the butler intoned.

"Understandable, but I believe if you tell him that Lord Farbury is here, he might make an exception."

My heart pounded painfully in my chest. Farbury? Surely not.

"Brex?" Edmund called out, climbing to his feet. "Is that you?"

He disappeared through the door and my fear flew in, swift and hard as I heard them greeting each other. I turned to Lisette. "Do you know who that is?" I asked.

She shook her head. "I don't recognize the name. What's wrong?"

"The Farburys I know are Saldian nobility," I whispered.

"Oh dear." She stood and I followed suit. I grabbed on to her hand as we listened closely.

"What are you doing in Murrwood?" Edmund asked.

"Well, I would have stayed in Winhaven with the rest of the delegation, but you weren't there," Farbury said in a chiding tone.

"Believe me, I would have preferred to meet you in Winhaven. Instead, I've been here, cleaning up the riffraff."

He chuckled. "So your father said. I was quite put out, you know. The only reason I agreed to come was because I thought you'd be in attendance. The meetings were dreadfully boring without you. So when it was all done, I had to come see you. Traveling all the way to Winberg and not getting to tell you how much uglier you've gotten would have been a travesty."

I was shocked by the disrespect, but Edmund just laughed.

"I have to go" was all I said to Lisette as the realization hit me. Edmund would no doubt want to introduce his friend to his wife, and I could not be here when that happened.

"Wait," she said.

I paused only long enough to say, "Don't mention me. Don't tell him anything about me" before I slipped out the door, heading toward the back of the house on quick feet.

"Of course you may stay," I heard Edmund say from the entry. "Come, you must meet my wife."

I kept walking, hoping he would ignore me, and I didn't stop until I reached the stairs that led down to the kitchen. I descended quickly and pushed through the door, anxious to put as much space between myself and Lord Farbury as possible.

I pushed the door closed with my whole body and then pressed my ear to the wood, listening for the sound of approaching footsteps, even though I knew pursuit was unlikely.

"Can I help you, my lady?"

I jerked around to see who had spoken. It was the cook, Jeanie, whom I had spoken with outside the old wing. She had a basket in front of her that was half-full of food.

I shook my head, swallowed, and willed the panicked look out of my eyes. "No, thank you. And it's just miss, not my lady." I usually didn't

bother correcting people, but with Lord Farbury under the roof, I needed to be simply Miss Rose.

She looked confused and cut her eyes across the room. I followed her gaze and saw a young man sitting at a table that was tucked up against the wall. I recognized him as the man I'd bumped into that first night. The one who was skilled with a staff. He looked just as confused as the cook. Of course they were confused. What was I doing here if I didn't need help with something?

Still, Jeanie was kind enough not to press. "Very well," she said as she tucked a napkin over the food in the basket. "If you decide you do need help with something, I'm certain Johnny could help," she said, tipping her head toward the young man. Then she looked to Johnny. "I'm taking this to Mr. Tennsworth."

"All right, Mum."

Jeanie looked to me once more and then offered a small smile before leaving out the back door. I stared at the door after she'd gone, wondering if I should follow her through it. What was rational? How could I protect myself? How much did I need to be afraid? Would Lord Farbury recognize me after four years? Could I go back to my room and just stay there until he left? How long was he going to stay? And would Edmund require me to meet him to be polite?

"Miss Rose."

I jerked my gaze from the door and settled it on the young man. Johnny, was it? "Yes?"

"Would you like to tell me what the problem is?"

I shook my head. "No problem."

He remained seated but drummed his fingers on the wood table as he studied me. "So, you are breathing heavily and crushing the fabric of your skirt with your fists because everything is just fine?"

I looked away and cleared my throat, trying to loosen the grip of my hands on my skirt. What should I say? What could I say? "There was a... man that came to see Lord Rockwell." I crossed my arms over my stomach, hoping to trap my hands into submission. "I don't wish to meet him." It was honest, but not too honest, and I hoped it might convince him to help me.

"Did he do something wrong?"

His concerned tone made me look up at him. "No, not...not just now. But I have met him before, and I do not care for his company."

"Do you need a place to hide?"

"No, of course not. I just need a place to be away from them for the time being, some place where they might not know to look for me."

A smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. "So, you need a place to hide." Hm. I realized that was exactly what I had described. I let out a sigh. "Yes. I suppose so."

He smiled, and the sincerity of it struck me. He wasn't smirking or being flirtatious. He was just being kind. "That shouldn't be too difficult," he said as he stood up.

"If you believe that," I said, barely managing to keep my train of thought as he rose to his full height, "then you must know some secret of this house that I don't."

"Come with me" was all he said as he crossed to the other side of the kitchen. On the far end of the same wall that the door was on, there was a small table, which he pushed aside.

I approached, curious. "Crouching beneath a table wasn't what I had in mind."

He looked up at me and grinned, then pushed on the wall behind the table with his shoulder. It swung open.

I studied it for several moments, stunned. Then I looked back at the door I had used to come into the kitchen. This room was at the back of the house and was rather long. Things suddenly clicked into place. We lived in the new wing, but obviously, this kitchen had once been connected to the old wing, the original manor house.

"Hopefully you don't mind a bit of dust," he said, gesturing through the doorway.

I was eager, both for the distraction and for the opportunity to put more space between myself and the man from Saldine, so I hurried to go where he pointed. "I don't mind."

I proceeded into the darkness a ways, then turned and looked back in time to see Johnny grab a lantern and follow me before closing the door behind him.

We walked side by side, staying in the ring of light created by the lantern as we walked down the wide, black corridor. The silence started to feel awkward.

"This is the old wing," I said in an attempt to break the tension. "It is."

"The cook mentioned that it was all closed up. It seems a waste though." I looked up in time to see his mouth pinch.

Then he nodded. "It is a waste."

He didn't say anything more, so I cast about for another topic. "The cook is your mother?"

"Yes, she is."

"And your name is Johnny?"

He chuckled a little. "My mother calls me Johnny. But I go by John."

"It's good to meet you, John. I'm Rose."

"I know," he said simply as he opened a door to the right and led me into a room full of furniture hidden under sheets. He walked over to what had to be a couch and set the lantern on top of a table that sat in front of it. "Here," he said, bending to pick up one of the corners. "If we lift this off carefully, it won't raise the dust too much."

I did as he asked, a little surprised that he was doing more than just showing me where to hide. Once we had set the sheet behind the couch, I let myself sit down on it, expecting that he'd sit with me.

He didn't.

"I will leave the lamp with you," he said and gave a little bow before turning back toward the door.

"Wait," I said.

He turned back, expectant, but I didn't know what to say. I just wasn't prepared for him to leave yet. Then it occurred to me that I could ask him about his training. "I watched you, the other day."

His brow rose and I realized how odd that sounded.

"When you and the others were training. At Sutton," I clarified.

John

So she was admitting to spying. I had to wonder why. "Yes, I saw you."

She blushed and dropped her gaze to her lap, making me instantly regret my words. I hadn't meant to embarrass her. "Not that I minded," I quickly amended as I stepped closer to her, back into the bright circle of light. "But I am curious why our training drew your attention."

Her hands fisted in her skirts again, rumpling them. The nervous gesture surprised me. Why would a lady who allowed me to escort her into a dark

and deserted portion of the house be nervous about observing something as public as our training sessions?

"It was the girls," she finally admitted.

That was...disappointing. I supposed I had enough pride in my abilities and my physique that I'd hoped her interest had something to do with me. "The girls?"

"You train girls to fight. To defend themselves."

"When they're interested, yes."

"I just..." She stood and paced away for a moment before turning back. "I never considered that was something a young girl could do."

I couldn't help the snort of laughter that escaped me. "Don't let my sister hear you say that."

"Your sister?" she asked.

"Gretchen. She and Lindy were the ones you saw training with us. She's been training with Falstone almost as long as I have and she's only twelve."

"Ah, yes," she said, one corner of her mouth curving up. "I saw you take her on with your staff, but you were on your knees. And..." Her eyes raked up and down my body and I resisted the urge to fidget. "I'm guessing she was the one with you that first night I bumped into you."

I had no doubt my shock was clearly written across my face. "That was you."

She nodded. "Of course. Who did you think it was?"

I gave a rather dramatic shrug. "I had no idea. Yes, I thought it might have been you or perhaps one of the new maids, but the encounter was so short and the idea of running into you in the dark woods was so strange... I'm sorry if I frightened you."

Her smile was sweet. "Only a little."

So I had frightened her. I shoved a hand through my hair. "I'm sorry. I know I can be...intimidating. Especially in the dark."

For some reason, my apology made her bite her lips together to keep from smiling more before she said, "It's fine. You startled me, yes. But I'd heard you speaking with your sister and the other young man, and you seemed quite harmless."

I snorted. "Should I be insulted by that?" I teased.

She rolled her eyes. "You know what I mean," she said as she wandered back to the couch and sat down, slumping against the back of it.

I couldn't help the way my brow lifted in surprise. She'd sat on the ground to watch our training, but that was when she was trying to hide. Humming and dancing among the trees was surprising enough, but watching her sit in such a relaxed way when it was only the two of us was...alluring. Who was this woman?

"I suppose I can't be expected to be intimidating when my little sister is teasing me," I conceded.

She let out a little chuckle and my chest got suddenly warm. It reminded me of those moments, watching her dance in the woods. "She seems like everything a little sister should be," she said with a smile.

"Do you have a little sister?" I asked, though why this gently bred woman was still conversing with me, I could not guess. "Or are you the little sister?"

She shook her head. "No sisters. Or brothers. Just my cousin."

"And does she have siblings?"

"Several, but they are all older and were married and living on their own by the time I went to live with her."

"Do you and Lady Rockwell get along well?"

"We do," she said with a firm nod, then looked up at me. "There's no need to loom. You can sit down."

It sounded more like an order than a request, and I was happy to obey. I sat on the other end of the couch, determined to give her a respectable distance. Though I couldn't help but wonder why she was so comfortable with me, here in the dark. It would be scandalous if we were found. Then again, it wouldn't be a good hiding place if I thought there was any chance of us being found. "There. I am sitting. Are you satisfied?" I asked with a teasing lift of my brow.

"Yes, thank you." She cast her eyes about at the dark room around us. "Now, tell me. Why is this wing not occupied?"

I shrugged and cleared my throat. Something about her almost demanding tone appealed to me. "I believe it holds grief for the family. I've never fully understood it." There was more I could have said, but I wasn't dumb enough to speak ill of the duke's family.

She sighed. "Right."

"Who is the man you are hiding from?" I asked it abruptly on purpose, both to change the subject and also hoping I could startle honesty out of her. She cut her eyes over to me but shook her head. "Just a nobleman."

"One you felt the need to hide from?"

"It is not a crime to dislike a person," she said with a bit of sass.

She was right, but I wondered if she was hiding something more. Back in the kitchens, I could have sworn she was genuinely frightened. "And what about your cousin? Does she dislike this man?"

She cast her eyes toward the ceiling. "He's a friend of Edmund's, so she doesn't really have a choice, does she?"

"You think Lord Rockwell would force this man's company on his own wife, even if she didn't care for him?"

She sat up straight. "That's not what I said. Things are just different now that Lisette is married. For years we lived a quiet life in her father's home, and now..." She lifted her hands in a helpless shrug.

"Now what?"

"Now we live with Edmund, and he..." She gave me a wry look, and the way she tilted her head in the lamplight tempted me to stare. "I don't wish to speak ill of Winberg's future ruler."

"Well," I said, settling my shoulder against the couch's back. "I can assure you that as a servant, I am excellent at never repeating words that are spoken to me in confidence."

She shook her head. I got the feeling that she wanted to talk about Edmund, but she was too concerned that such criticism would make its way back to him. I couldn't exactly start blabbing on about how I couldn't stand the man, no matter how much I wished to offer her understanding. But perhaps if I spoke in vague terms... "I've spent the majority of the past seven years working here with no master or mistress in residence. I can tell you that having Lord Rockwell in residence creates a very different atmosphere than when he is gone."

"Hmm." She chewed on her lip for several moments as she thought. "Does he treat the staff...well?"

My brow shot up. What exactly was she getting at? Before I could form a response, she continued.

"Do I—" She paused, clearly unsure whether or not she should continue. "Do you think I have reason to worry about Lisette?" She looked up at me and her eyes were wide and worried.

My heart went out to her, knowing that her worry was likely a result of interactions she'd already seen. "I haven't been around Lord Rockwell all that much, but I have never seen him be a physical threat," I assured her.

"However, I know there have been times when people, both servants and nobility, have felt manipulated by him."

Her chest lifted as she took a deep breath and then let it out slowly. "That...is some comfort."

"Has he ever..." I let the question trail away. Blatantly asking if Lord Rockwell, the future ruler of Winberg, was a violent man wasn't something I could bring myself to ask. Instead, I redirected the conversation. "So you came here to escape both the visitor and Lord Rockwell himself?"

She let out a breathy little laugh, though there was something feigned about it. "Yes, I suppose that's an apt description."

"Lord Rockwell makes you uncomfortable?"

Her eyes darted to mine, as though suddenly worried. "It's not as though it's constant," she said. "I don't mean to imply that it's always terrible. Sometimes he's perfectly civil. Most of the time, in fact."

She was trying to convince herself. I had no doubt that Lord Rockwell either ignored this girl or else treated her poorly. Why I was so sure of that, I couldn't say. And honestly, I hoped I was wrong. I hoped that he was not the bully I remembered.

Roslyn

I was defending him. Why was I defending him? Edmund wasn't vicious or brutal, but he wasn't good either. He more often than not looked at everyone with disdain, and he said things to Lisette that made my blood boil.

But I couldn't say all of that. Even though John seemed to understand what I was saying, I couldn't go running my mouth about how I didn't like Edmund. I relied on his hospitality to keep me safe, and his servants were likely loyal. I needed to change the subject.

"Do you like working here?"

"I do. I enjoy my work. I'm here with my mother and sister. And I'm well compensated."

I was glad for it. My mother had felt the same way before she'd married my father, when she'd been working as his housekeeper. But she'd told me stories about the struggles she'd endured in her earlier life. I knew a great many people of the lower class suffered their entire lives, so I was grateful that at least that was not the case here.

"And what about you?" he asked. "What do you think of your new home?"

I suddenly remembered what Lisette had said about the situation here that had required the duke's attention. The corrupt lawmen. The unrest. The servants who fought back. I sat up and turned more fully toward him. "Are you one of them?" I asked before I thought better of it.

His grin was mesmerizing. It brightened his entire face and seemed to welcome me in. "I'm afraid I need more information if I'm to answer truthfully," he said.

Right. He wasn't reading my mind. "The ones who fought. The renegade servants who rose up against the magistrate."

"Renegade servants?" he repeated as though he found the title amusing. "Yes, I suppose I am."

"Then I have you to thank," I said, feeling an instant camaraderie with him.

His brow furrowed in adorable confusion. "For what?"

"For forcing me to move here."

His face fell. "Oh. I'm...sorry. We had no idea that the duke would require Lord Rockwell to remain, and I certainly had no knowledge of... you."

I gave a little shake of my head. "I wasn't being sarcastic. I truly am grateful to be here."

He looked slightly appeased by my reassurance. "And Lady Rockwell?"

"Still deciding, I suppose. But I don't get the sense that she dislikes it. At least not any more than she disliked the palace."

"I don't believe Lord Rockwell is happy with the move though."

"Not at all. I think he hates it here. But why?" I asked as my curiosity reared up again. "I thought maybe he was just upset that his father ordered him here, but..."

John blew out a breath. "I don't know the whole story. His brother died here, and the way his brother's widow handled things afterwards was upsetting to him. They fought."

I could tell he was choosing his words very carefully. "You can speak freely," I said.

He smiled, but it was more of a grimace. "As you pointed out, he is the future ruler of Winberg, and I am only a groundskeeper."

I chewed on my lip, tempted to tell him I was a foreigner and had no loyalty to Winberg or its rulers, but of course I couldn't.

"Well," I said, disappointed not to have learned more about Edmund, but determined to keep the conversation going. "Thankfully, I have no ill feelings attached to this place," I quipped as I leaned back, somehow enjoying even this somber, abandoned wing of the house. "I love it here."

"You've been here barely a week and already you are in love?"

"Yes, I am." I looked at him and offered a smile.

His eyes seemed to soften at my enthusiastic response. "What do you like?" he asked.

I smiled, remembering the cool ground beneath my bare feet as I'd danced and the song that floated on the breeze. "Everything, I suppose. The new wing. The grounds. The quiet. The lack of people gawking."

"Winhaven was not to your liking?"

I shook my head, not caring that some of my hair came loose.

"What was it like?"

"There were too many people, but none of them actually knew me or cared to know me," I answered in a bold moment of candor. "No one wanted me there, except for Lisette."

"Well, I'm glad our little corner of the dukedom suits you better."

"Much better. I didn't care for the palace at all."

He let his eyes wander over me, assessing. "I suppose that doesn't surprise me. Maidens who lounge on dusty couches in deserted houses probably don't belong in palaces."

I choked on a chuckle. "The more you get to know me, the more you'll realize how true that is." I looked over at him, surprised by how comfortable I was here with him.

"Are we going to get to know one another?" he asked with a bit of a challenge in his tone. "Servants do not usually acquaint themselves with the guests of Lord and Lady Rockwell."

Perhaps not, but I was much more comfortable around people like John than I was around people of my own class. Plus, I had a particular reason for getting to know John. I likely wouldn't find a better time to bring it up, so I sucked in a breath and dove in. "You asked before why I was watching you train."

He seemed only slightly surprised by my change of topic. "I did. You said something about being intrigued that my sister and Lindy train with

us."

"Yes," I said, charging ahead. "I don't suppose there's any way that...you see, I would like to learn like they are."

He blinked several times before finally speaking. "I beg your pardon?"

"I want to learn."

"To fight?"

"Yes. Would that...be possible?"

He was clearly still trying to wrap his brain around such a concept but finally nodded. "I suppose there's no reason you couldn't."

"Really?"

He thought for several moments. "If that's what you really wanted."

"I know it's an odd request."

"Not so odd," he countered, though I could tell he said it to make me feel better, not necessarily because he believed it.

I was just grateful he hadn't dismissed the idea out of hand. If I could learn to protect myself, at least to some degree, I might actually be comfortable when I was finally able to go home. "I'd just...I'd like to learn."

"Very well. Um." His eyes cast about as if he were trying to get his thoughts in line. "You may have noticed that we only train on Sutton land." "I did notice that."

"That's because those of us who work here for Lord Rockwell are unsure whether or not he would appreciate his servants taking time to train with weapons. Of course, we always put our work and responsibilities first," he hurried to assure me. "We'd never shirk our duty."

"I understand," I said. There might not be anything technically wrong with the Bridgefield servants taking time to learn weaponry, but that didn't mean Lord Rockwell would appreciate it.

"Would you like to join the group when we spar? Or would you like Falstone or Marcus to instruct you?"

My brows pulled together. "Who?"

"They are Princess Marilee's guards. They're the ones who have taught all of us."

"Oh." I didn't know if I was comfortable with that. "I was thinking perhaps you could just show me some things." I wrung my hands, trying to contain my nerves.

His eyes widened. "Certainly," he conceded, though his unsure tone contradicted the word.

I couldn't explain why the idea of him teaching me was more comfortable than someone else doing it, but it was. "I'd rather not make a spectacle of myself by joining a group that would no doubt be curious over my presence."

"They'll be curious regardless, but I can understand if you don't want an audience."

"So you'll do it?" I asked, needing the confirmation.

He nodded and smiled, seeming excited by the idea. "When would you like to start?"

"Is tomorrow too soon?"

He tilted his head and studied me. It was such a boyish gesture on such a mature body, and the combination made my stomach flutter. "Tomorrow it is," he agreed.

My heart lightened, grateful that John had agreed to my bold request. But then an awkward silence settled between us. I cast my mind about, searching for a change of subject.

"Tell me something I don't know," he said.

I was intrigued by his abrupt request. "Something you don't know?"

He nodded, a grin stretched across his face. "Something you don't normally tell people."

The teasing glint in his eye put me at ease once more. It wasn't often that I was teased, but his easy grin made me want to play along. "Let me think," I said, resting my head on the back of the couch and tapping my finger against my lips. All the things that immediately came to mind were too sad for this sort of game. I had to think of something more lighthearted.

"It can't be that hard," he said after a moment. "After all, I know practically nothing about you."

The way he turned toward me, as though anxious for my answer, made me want to curl up in the comfort of the couch.

A little grin pressed upon my lips when I came up with an idea. I turned to him, trying and failing to look serious. "I think broccoli is the worst taste in the world."

He tipped his head back and laughed, then pressed a hand to his heart. "Oh, Miss Rose, you *wound* me. Your words hurt my very soul."

"The truth is hard to hear sometimes," I said, enjoying the sound of his laughter.

"I will never yield to such an opinion," he proclaimed.

"Now it's your turn," I said, raising my brows at him. "Tell me something I don't know."

"Well, clearly you don't know much if you are—"

"No insults!" I insisted, brandishing my finger at him. "One must not judge the truths of another."

He shook his head with another small chuckle, then let out a sigh as he thought. "As part of my renegade activities..." He let the words dangle as he tilted his head and raised his brow at me.

"Oh yes, please tell me all your renegade secrets." I scooted closer.

He pressed his lips together, prolonging the moment of suspense just a little longer before saying, "I stole a tremendous amount of money."

My chin jerked back. "What?"

He held his hands up. "It was all returned, and I had very good reasons."

I blinked several times in disbelief, my mouth hanging open for a moment before I said, "Oh, I must hear this story."

It was better than I could have imagined. Not only was he a gifted storyteller, but it was a fascinating tale. I suspected that large parts of it were made up, but I didn't care. He spoke of his friends with warmth and respect. Amidst the adventure, he painted a picture of safety and contentment that was difficult for me to relate to, and I ached for it.

By the time he'd finished telling it, enough time had passed that I felt safe returning to the main house.

John held the lantern aloft while we made our way back through the old wing and into the kitchen. He opened the door just a little and peeked through. "It looks empty," he said, and then opened it wider. "Quickly," he encouraged. "Someone could return any moment."

I squeezed past him, and as he repositioned the table in front of the seldom-used door, I crossed to the door that led to the new wing. Just before I reached it, the sound of voices reached us from just outside the door that led to the yard.

"Go" was all he said.

I didn't need telling twice. I was incredibly grateful for John's help, but I had no wish to cause rumors and speculation to start churning about me. So I dashed out the door that led to the corridor and up the stairs to the main

floor. I paused to listen, hoping that it was late enough that Edmund and Lisette had retired.

I didn't hear anything and was able to pad quietly up to my room without encountering anyone.

Easing the door shut, I turned to see Everly jumping up from where she'd been waiting for me.

"Where have you been, miss?"

"I was just exploring. Why?"

"Lady Rockwell was looking for you."

"Was she?" I asked, trying to sound innocent and oblivious.

"Yes. She seemed worried about you."

I had no doubt. "I'll be sure to speak with her first thing tomorrow. I believe she's retired for the evening."

"Yes. Everyone has," she said, looking confused. I wasn't usually prone to staying awake after everyone else.

"I assume Lord Rockwell's guest is staying the night," I commented as I turned my back to allow her to unlace my dress.

"Yes, and he is a strange one."

Everly was not an overly chatty maid, so this observation was out of character."Why do you say that?"

"Well, because he talked to me, miss."

My chin pulled in. "What do you mean, he talked to you?" Granted, I had regular communication with some servants, but that wasn't the norm. Most nobility hadn't been raised by a common mother and taught to respect everyone, regardless of station.

"I passed by him as he was being shown to his room by a footman. Lady Rockwell had inquired about you, so I asked the footman if he knew where you were. He didn't, but then Lord Farbury asked about you."

My stomach clenched. "What about me?"

"Just your name and where you were from."

My chest felt suddenly weighed down. "What did you tell him?" I was grateful I faced away from her so that she could not see the terror on my face.

"Just that you were from a small village out in the country." She pushed my dress down over my shift.

I stepped out of my dress. "You didn't mention I was from Saldine?"

"No, miss." She started on the laces of my stays. "That's not something you regularly share with people. I thought I should keep it to myself."

I tried not to make my relief obvious. "Thank you, Everly."

Still, I was far from comfortable, and I would not be at ease until he left. I wondered how long he would stay. A few days? A week? How long would I have to avoid him, making up excuses and pretending to be busy or sick? Luckily, I knew that Lisette would help me steer clear of him, but the next few days were going to be tense. I had to keep myself safe. I could not be complacent and foolhardy. I had done that in the past and paid the price.

The ache in my right shoulder worsened as the memories poured in. I hated that the presence of Lord Farbury was causing them to intrude here and now, in this place that had offered a little promise for being a haven. I didn't want the shadows of Saldine to ruin the bit of joy that felt so close here.

Before

December 9th, Century of the Lion, year 83 Kingdom of Saldine Roslyn, Thirteen years old

"Tell me the story of this hand," my mother would say. Though it wasn't always a hand. She asked me to tell her the stories of my knees, shoulder, elbow, neck. Whatever was hurting me, she wanted to know the story. I thought it was a silly game when I was little, a way for her to distract me from my little scrapes and bruises and tease me into a better mood.

And it was that, but it was also so much more.

"When we get our feelings hurt, that pain can get stuck inside us. We bury it deep in our gut, or maybe we hide it beneath our ribs."

"Why?" I would ask.

"Because we're trying to protect it. We're trying to keep it from getting bigger."

"Does it work?"

"Sometimes, at least for a while. But if we leave it there too long," she explained, running her hands through the tangles of my hair, "it will grow and get stronger."

"So how do we make it go away?"

"By telling the stories that make us hurt. By feeling the pain and then letting it go."

I liked the idea of telling tales, and when I was seven and eight years old, I would make up silly stories about how my elbow had decided to do a jig and jerked out of place. But as I got older, I started to understand the wisdom of telling the real stories. I started to understand the real reason why every time we went to the Saldian palace, my stomach would hurt, not in a grumbling, upset way, but as a piercing sharp pain in my side. I started

to understand the story behind that pain—the pain of trying to shrink myself. I didn't fit in among the other nobles. They didn't want me there, and that pierced me through.

By thirteen, I was used to that pain, and I had no idea just how much worse it could get until my aunt Selina died and I started to understand the enormity of how much they hated me.

My parents and I stood on the palace steps alongside the king and queen and other nobility as the entourage that accompanied Aunt Selina's body came to a halt just below us. My father stood beside me, stoic and sad. My mother stood on the other side of him, lending what support she could.

Uncle Richard and Lisette stood in front of the coffin, having led the way through the streets as the citizens of Saldine took their last look and said their last goodbyes to one of the daughters of the realm.

As first cousins to the king, who no longer had siblings, my father and Aunt Selina had been in the line of succession, just after young Prince Marcos. Now I wasn't sure how things fell. I didn't understand it. I only knew that I was sad. Sad for my father. Sad for my uncle. Sad for Lisette, who had already lost one mother and had now lost another.

Uncle Richard and Lisette joined us on the steps, and Lisette slipped her hand into mine. I looked up at her, noting how blank her expression was. The priest stepped forward, speaking the words of remembrance over Aunt Selina, which declared her life full and complete. Then we went inside the palace chapel with the rest of the nobility.

I was used to these funerals. I'd attended one for both of the king's younger siblings and their families. The same fever that had taken Aunt Selina had been ravaging our kingdom for nearly five years. It was the reason the royal family was so small now.

Thankfully, Lisette had not fallen ill. With no siblings of my own, she was my best friend and closest family. I did not know what I would do if she or my parents were taken from me.

After the service, we all milled about on the palace lawn, but I stayed close to Lisette. I wanted to comfort her, yes. But I also knew that the children who hated me and regularly tormented me would be less likely to approach with Lisette at my side. She was four years older than I was, and she held herself with regal authority. Neil, Everett, and Nina would hesitate to insult me with her at my side.

"Lisette."

We both turned at the sound of her father calling. He stood beside the Earl of Ravenna and was beckoning Lisette over. She started walking that way and I let go of her hand.

She turned back. "Aren't you coming with me?"

I glanced over at the earl and saw his son, Neil, standing close by with a sneer on his face. "No," I said. "I'm going to walk through the gardens."

She nodded, knowing how much I hated being around Neil and the others. "I'll find you later," she promised.

I nodded and retreated, seeking the comfort of the gardens. I found my favorite corner, which was filled with roses in full bloom, and bent to inhale their scent.

"Ow!" I hollered as someone yanked on a fistful of my hair. I spun and kicked out at Everett.

He let go of my hair so he could avoid my foot. "Serves you right, gutterling!" he sneered. It was their favorite insult.

"Stop it!" I said. Wasn't it bad enough that my aunt had died? Shouldn't that be enough misery to make them happy? But no, today would be just like any other day. Neil had spilled jam on my dress the last time I'd been forced to be around them, and now Everett had ruined my hair. My maid had worked on it for ages this morning so I would look perfect. My eyes burned, both because of his hateful words and because of the pain in my scalp. I refused to cry though, glaring at him instead. Everett and Neil loved it when I cried. My parents kept assuring me that they'd get tired of teasing me eventually, but it had been years and nothing had changed. If anything, it had gotten worse.

Everett kicked at the dirt below his feet, sprinkling my dress with dust before running off to join Neil, who was waiting at the edge of the garden, a mean smirk on his face. I'd thought he would stay with his father, but I'd been wrong. They both sauntered away as though they owned the kingdom.

Even though Neil was nearly sixteen and should have grown out of his bullying, he was the worst. If he'd decided not to hate me, then Everett, who was fourteen, and Nina, who was twelve, would have followed suit, but every time Neil saw me, I felt like he hated me a little bit more. Mama used to tell me it was because I was a girl and higher ranking than them, but I knew it was because I was a gutterling, a halfbreed. Papa was a duke, born into nobility, but mama...mama came from the lower class, and the

kingdom would never forgive her for marrying the highest-ranking noble in all of Saldine.

I was just grateful I hardly ever had to see Everett or Neil. It was only at these stuffy court funerals or celebrations. As the few highest-ranking families left after the fevers had swept through the realm, the king insisted on gathering together as the descendants of the old king so that we could show the strength and unity of the family and the kingdom. It was necessary. Mother used that word a lot when talking about court affairs. Necessary.

But today really was necessary. We had to be here to honor Aunt Selina, to mourn with Lisette and Uncle Richard. So instead of going and crying to my mother like I wanted to, I brushed off my skirt the best I could and walked over to one of the garden ponds, hoping I'd be able to see my reflection well enough to fix my hair. I could barely see my outline, but I did manage to get some pieces pushed back into place so they weren't sticking out like crazy.

A bird landed at the edge of the pond and looked up at me. "How do I look?" I asked.

It tilted its head the other way.

"Presentable? Or are my eyes all puffy?"

It hopped a bit closer, paused, then took off.

"Very well. I suppose I'll call it good enough."

I took a breath, straightened my spine, and forced myself to look like the well-bred daughter of the Duke of Weltshire. They might call me a gutterling, but I wouldn't act like one at my aunt's funeral.

So I walked tall as I left the gardens and rejoined my parents on the open lawn where tables laden with food and drink were spread out. When I passed by His and Her Majesty, the king barely acknowledged me, but Queen Talia gave me a little wink, and their son, Prince Marcos, waved at me from behind his mother's skirts.

I joined my parents where they were speaking to Everett's parents, Lord and Lady Malladon. The Malladons ignored my arrival, just like they were ignoring my mother. It didn't matter that my father and Lord Malladon were cousins and that they'd grown up together. The moment my father had married Mama, Malladon and his wife had decided they hated him.

Sometimes I despised my father's world. If I could live my whole life in my gardens and orchards with just my mother and father, I would have been

happy. Instead, the ranks of nobility continued to shrink, and our presence was more essential and yet more despised than ever before. So we showed up, and though my greatest wish was to disappear, I did my best to make polite conversation with the children who tormented me, and their parents who despised me.

John

She had said we were going to get to know one another. Or had she? That conversation kept looping through my mind, but I couldn't remember exactly what she'd said. I tried to rid the notion from my head. Just because she'd seemed content to converse with me in the old wing didn't mean that she was looking for some sort of special acquaintance or friendship.

I was flattered that she'd asked me to train her. That meant she had noticed me, or at least my skill. Or maybe it was just my size. That was the thing most people noticed first. Not that I minded. It had served me well. But that didn't mean I needed to start getting ideas about me and the very fine lady who was Lord Rockwell's houseguest.

Ludicrous. And I'd better remember that. But with my hands busy tending the estate grounds, my mind was free to wander, and it kept wandering back to her, about how I could teach her. Would she take to it easily? Would she hate it? What sort of proximity might this training require?

"Do you want to go a few rounds this afternoon?" Tyson asked as we were pulling our tools out of the shed.

"Can't. I have something else I have to do."

"What's that?"

What indeed. I looked at him, then back at the tools I was gathering, wondering how much, if anything, I should tell him.

"Oh, now you have to tell me," he declared with relish. "If it was something mundane, you wouldn't hesitate in saying so. You've got a secret, mate, and it's time for you to share."

I shook my head, half annoyed, half amused. "Someone has asked me to teach them how to fight."

"Someone? Someone besides those of us who already fight?"

I cut my eyes over to him. "Obviously."

"From here, or from Sutton manor?"

"Here."

"Who is it? One of the footmen?" His face scrunched up in thought before his brow rose and he crowed. "Oh ho ho. Or is it one of the *maids*?"

I shook my head. He wasn't going to believe me when I told him the truth. "Neither."

"Come on, mate. I don't want to guess forever. Just tell me."

We closed the shed door, and I secured the latch before turning to look down at him. "It's Miss Rose."

His smug curiosity morphed into stunned disbelief. I waited patiently for him to find his words again.

"You're teaching Lady Rockwell's very pretty cousin to fight?" He made it sound like I was stark raving mad, which...maybe I was.

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because she asked." We each gathered an armful of tools and headed back toward the manor house.

"But why did she ask?" he demanded, following after me.

"I assume it's because she wants to learn."

"But why—"

"Tyson," I cut him off. "I have no idea. I'm just as baffled as you are."

"But why did she ask you?"

I couldn't very well explain about being shut up in the old wing with her. Even I didn't understand how or why she'd asked me to stay there with her. "I was in the vicinity when she had the idea, I suppose. And she'd seen us training, so she knew I was skilled."

"Caught her eye, did you?" he teased, nudging my ribs with his elbow.

"Don't be daft." I turned to face him, tapping his shoulder with the handle of a rake. "And don't go starting any rumors. The last thing any of us needs is to be caught gossiping about Lady Rockwell's relatives. I already feel like we're walking on shaky ground with Lord Rockwell."

Tyson shrugged. "What's he going to do?"

I chuckled without humor. "Do you really want to find out?"

He rolled his eyes. "I'm not going to be stupid."

I barked a laugh and continued walking. "I'll believe that when I see it."

I took breakfast in my room, which was not unusual, so it would not be suspicious. Lisette stopped by after she'd eaten to check on me. She slipped in the door and came to sit right beside me, her face and posture anxious.

"Are you all right?"

I nodded. "Thus far, I have avoided him. Do you know how long he intends to stay?"

She gave a helpless shrug. "He has not said, and Edmund seems to enjoy the company, so..."

My shoulders fell a little, so she set a reassuring hand on my arm.

"Tonight over dinner, I'll be certain to ask how long we might have the pleasure of his company."

"That way I'll know how long I have to hide?" The idea of hiding shouldn't bother me. I was used to hiding.

"Where did you go last night anyway?"

A smile pulled on my lips. "I found a very good hiding spot. But I'm not going to tell you where."

"Why not?"

"If Edmund wants to know where I've disappeared to, you can honestly tell him you don't know."

"Oh. Yes, that's an excellent idea. In fact, don't tell me any of your plans." She stood. "I have to go prepare for the day. Edmund has asked that I be the one to give Lord Farbury a tour of the house."

She seemed excited by the idea and I smiled, happy that she was happy. She kissed her fingers and waved them my way, the same way she'd done since we were children.

After breakfast, Everly came to lace me into the simplest of my dresses, and when I was ready, I took the servants' stairs down to the first floor and found the library. Sitting in the windowsill, hidden behind the heavy drapes with a book in my lap, was so reminiscent of my time at home that it made me melancholy, but in a good way—in the way that reminds you that there are people in the world who love you without condition, even if you can't be with them.

Lisette found me at the lunch hour and let me know that Edmund and Lord Farbury had gone for a ride into the village, so it was safe for us to dine together. "Has he asked about me?" I asked, remembering Everly's words from last night.

"He hasn't," she said. And though that should have been a good thing, she sounded worried. "I know he saw you walking away last evening, but he hasn't asked about you. And that feels more ominous than if he were to ask."

My brow furrowed, and I was stuck in paranoid thoughts for the rest of the meal. My only comfort was that he had not seen my face, and even if he had, four years had changed me, and we had never had a close association. And, as far as I knew, he'd never hated me enough to want me dead.

Since I was anxious to avoid Edmund and Lord Farbury's return, I went outside a full fifteen minutes before John and I were supposed to meet, happy to have the woods where I could hide and no one would be the wiser.

The weather was temperate, and I had yet to tire of the fact that I could stroll as far as the eye could see and smell as many flowers as I liked without being watched by curious members of court or having someone interrupt my wandering. I could take up space here, and no one seemed to mind.

Of course, as it turned out, my wandering *was* interrupted as I walked among the trees. I had done nothing at all to be disruptive, and yet I was receiving a thorough chastening. The bird was on the ground, squawking and flailing.

"Whatever is the matter?" I asked, curious that this bird would scold me instead of flying away. "I'm certain I didn't tread on you, and I haven't been throwing any stones."

It continued to squawk and I smiled, amused by its antics. I crouched down, hoping that might be less threatening. "I'm really not such a bad person," I tried to assure the creature. It crouched lower and stuck out a wing at an awkward angle. "Are you hurt? Do you need help?" I reached out a hand, but that only made it worse.

"You've angered the mama bird," a voice called from behind me.

I turned to see John coming toward me. "I didn't mean to, and how do you know it's a mother?"

"Come here," he said, beckoning me over to him.

I went willingly, trusting his judgment.

As I went farther from the bird, she became quieter but still squawked. "It's a killdeer," John said.

I looked at him in confusion. "What?"

"The name of the bird. It's called a killdeer. They make their nests on the ground instead of in trees. When something comes too close, the mother will go away from the nest and throw a tantrum in an effort to draw the predator away from her young."

"Oh." I looked back at the bird, feeling quite guilty now. "I'm so sorry, madam, I didn't mean to frighten you."

John chuckled. "What are you doing?"

"Apologizing," I said as I slowly backed away, giving the poor, frightened mother bird her space.

"To a bird?" he asked as he backed up alongside me.

"Yes, of course. She was talking to me. It's only fair that I respond, especially now that I know what she was saying."

The killdeer was quieting, so I turned my back to her and continued walking away, John's mass keeping pace at my side.

"Do you make a habit of talking to animals?" John asked after a few moments.

I lifted a shoulder, just now realizing how odd that might seem to him. "Animals are easier to get along with than people, and they are far less likely to ridicule." I probably sounded like I didn't like people as a rule, which wasn't true at all. I desperately wanted to be accepted and befriended, but I had spent most of my life being unwanted by everyone outside my own home. Those of my class in Saldine had shunned me, and drawing close to people in Winhaven had seemed dangerous. The only time I'd been able to comfortably make friends was during the three years I'd spent living under my uncle's roof with Lisette.

"You seem to have an easy enough time getting along with me," John observed, pulling me from my melancholy thoughts.

I gave him a strained smile. I couldn't explain that for me, such connections were rare, and that the way he'd helped me hide from Lord Farbury with such ease had unlocked something inside me. His face had been so different than the way people usually watched me. In Saldine, I'd been constantly sneered at and viewed as less-than. In Winhaven, most were polite but aloof, while others looked at me with suspicion, not understanding how someone they did not recognize had earned a place in the sovereign palace.

But John? He had looked at me with...curiosity? Kindness? Maybe even concern? And I hadn't been able to resist reaching for that connection. I had so few connections, because they all felt unsafe. But John? John had felt safe.

When I didn't give any further response, he cleared his throat. "Have you given any thought to what weapon you'd like to learn?" We reached the stream and he offered me a hand.

"Umm, no, I suppose I haven't." I stepped easily onto the opposite bank with his help, a little sad when I had to let go of his hand. The contact had been reassuring.

"My preference is the staff, but I'm also adept at knives and swords. If you want to learn archery, I'm afraid I won't be much help."

"Oh." Suddenly I was overwhelmed. Did I want to learn how to fight with a weapon? "If I learn to fight with a weapon, wouldn't that require that I always carry one with me?"

"If you wanted to be ready at all times, then yes."

I chewed on my lip, thinking.

"Though, I suppose I should ask if you plan to attack or just defend yourself?"

"Just defend," I said with certainty.

His brow scrunched in curiosity. "Why only defend?"

I shrugged. "I don't actually want to hurt anyone."

This time, his brow lifted and he blinked in surprise. "Do you actually want to learn to fight?" he asked.

It seemed a silly question. "Of course. I wouldn't have asked if I didn't." "No, I mean, do you think you'll enjoy it?"

I didn't respond, since I wasn't sure what he meant.

"Or," he continued, his face falling into serious thought, "are you wanting to learn out of necessity?"

I nodded. That sounded right. "I just want to be prepared in case..." "In case?"

I gave a little shrug and looked away. "In case I need to defend myself." I didn't want to explain any more than that.

"Is there someone specific you have in mind?" He asked the question too carefully, and it made me worry that he was already guessing too much, especially since he knew I was avoiding Lord Farbury.

Of course the answer to his question was yes, but he didn't need to know all the details, so I shook my head. "No, of course not. I just feel like preparing would be wise. I saw those girls fighting and thought it would be a comfort to know such things." I tried to give a teasing smile. "You never know what sort of ruffians will be wandering the woods."

He winced but smiled. "Ruffian, eh?"

I shrugged. "Am I wrong?"

He looked me over for a moment. Long enough that I started to feel warm. "I suppose I don't mind being a ruffian."

I let out a little laugh. "Of course you wouldn't."

He gestured toward a tree which had several wooden practice swords, knives, and staffs leaning against it. "Here we are."

We were still in the forest, not far from the stream, which meant we weren't close to the usual training grounds. He must have decided not to subject me to the scrutiny of the other servants as we trained, for which I was grateful.

He crossed and picked up a few of the wooden weapons. "Hmm." He chewed on his lip. "Might I make a suggestion?"

"Yes, please."

"I think focusing on knives and staff would be best."

My face twisted in confusion. "I'm not going to carry a staff with me."

He smiled. "Of course not," he said with a little chuckle. "You'll carry a knife, maybe two."

I squirmed at the thought but nodded.

"However, if you don't have a weapon on you, the thing you're most likely to find on hand in any place is a staff. Whether that's a tree branch you find in the forest or a broom you find in a kitchen, I think it's your best chance at finding a weapon on hand."

I rubbed my palms against my skirts but nodded. "That makes sense."

"Very good. You take this," he said, holding a staff out toward me.

I took it, my hands wrapping so tightly around it that my knuckles went white.

"Now. I'm going to step out of the way, and I want you to swing it around. Get used to the weight of it, the way it feels in your hands, how it moves."

I did so, having to remind myself why I was doing this.

She tested the weight in her hands and then started moving it around. Most people tested it out for a few moments and then wanted to move on to learning specific skills. But not Miss Rose. No, she moved in all sorts of different ways, swinging, moving, stepping, noticing when one end of the staff caught on the ground. I admired that she wanted to really feel comfortable with it before moving on, and I thought perhaps she'd end up being a natural learner.

After a handful of minutes, she set the staff at her side and looked to me. "I think I'm ready now."

"Good." I stepped forward. "We'll start with a strike from above. Hold the middle of the staff and put your hands at shoulder height."

She did as I said, looking awkward and unsure.

"Put your right leg back, your hips forward. Like this," I said as I demonstrated.

She looked at me and then down at herself as she tried to imitate me.

"Now, you'll want to step forward and a little to the right as you bring the staff down toward your opponent."

She followed my instructions and did fine with the striking movement.

"Good. Now do that same movement, but aim toward me." I positioned myself in front of her.

"But I'll hit you."

"No, you'll hit my sword because I'll block the blow. Go ahead," I urged and held my sword at the ready so that she could see I was prepared to raise it and block her attack.

She adjusted her grip and shifted her feet back and forth, then struck.

I was very proud of myself for not laughing. She had closed her eyes when she moved to strike. I caught the blow with my sword, and when I looked at her, her eyes were pinched tight. Then she cracked one eye open to look at me.

I pressed my lips and then managed to say, "Well done."

Her shoulders slumped. "No, it wasn't." She sounded defeated and let the end of her staff drop to the ground.

"It was your first attempt. Try again."

She did, but with similar results.

We kept trying, but the sad truth was that Rose had no natural skill when it came to defending herself. I might have to rethink my idea of training her with knives. If she couldn't be comfortable wielding a staff, she'd never be comfortable with a blade.

I tried to teach her a block next, but she flinched at everything, always retreating and never standing her ground. Her instinct was to avoid at all costs.

This was my third attempt at swinging my sword toward her in slow motion and trying to get her to block, but she just skittered away again.

I let out a sigh.

"I know!" she said, dropping the staff and putting her hands over her eyes. "I'm sorry. I know I'm being ridiculous."

"No need to apologize. We just need to find a different approach." Trying to teach her specific skills wasn't going to do her any good unless she was actually willing to engage. I thought back to what she had said after I asked her if she needed to learn out of necessity. She'd said she only wanted to be prepared, but I had a niggling suspicion that there was a specific person, or multiple people, whom she feared. Maybe I needed to focus on teaching her to react to a threat first.

It was worth a shot. She stood there, a frown marring her face, though she still looked ridiculously pretty. Finally, an idea struck me. "Stay right there." I took my sword and drew a circle around her position. I made it big enough that if she stood in the middle and reached her hand out, and someone else stood outside the circle and reached in, they would not be able to touch. "All right," I said, coming around to face her. "This is your circle. You are the sovereign ruler of this circle."

A smile curved her mouth. "It's quite the kingdom."

"Yes, it is. Now, since you are the only occupant of your sovereign circle, you are responsible for keeping it safe. That means that if someone comes inside it, you must get them out."

One brow lifted in question, but nodded.

"Just as important, if you leave your circle, you no longer have control because you will be in someone else's territory. So you must stay in the circle, and you must keep all others out."

She looked a bit confused, but willing. "All right."

"And that includes me." Without warning, I stepped into her circle and had a hand at her throat before she'd done so much as raise a hand. Instead

she stared up at me with her big blue eyes, her mouth formed into a startled O. "You lost your kingdom, milady."

She blinked and pushed away from me, her eyes narrowed in a glare. "I wasn't ready," she said, tilting her chin up.

Good. Sass was good. I immediately backed up and out of her circle. "Very well. Now you know how it works."

"But how do I keep you out?" she asked, raising the staff tentatively. "Any way you can."

I advanced again, but she was more ready this time. She tried to keep her staff pointed at me, but I easily managed to push it aside and get close enough to grab her arm.

She looked up at me, her breathing a little heavy, but she didn't look alarmed. I wasn't making the point I needed to. I pulled her a little closer and she took in a little breath. "Would you be so reticent if you thought I wished you harm?"

Her brow and her mouth turned down again, but she shook her head. "Of course not."

"Then imagine that I do." I backed away again, out of her circle. But I didn't come at her right away; instead, I let myself prowl the perimeter, hoping that my face looked hard enough that it might remind her of a true foe. I had no wish to frighten her, but she needed to at least see me as an opponent worth engaging.

"You're not attacking," she said after several moments, and her voice shook just a little.

"Predators rarely announce themselves," I said, my voice tinged with a dark edge.

"So..." She turned to keep me in sight as I circled. "I just wait?"

I didn't answer, just backed up a few steps and then took several large steps right at her. She jumped a little, but swung the staff in a horizontal arc in front of her, and I backed up to avoid it.

"Very good," I complimented with a smile, then raised my brow to goad her—just a little. "What else could you do?" I moved forward slowly this time.

She swung again. "I don't know," she said, clearly frustrated as I circled around and she turned to keep me in her sights. "Tell me what I can do."

"You have a voice." I stepped forward again.

"Get back!" she shouted.

"Good. If you ever feel threatened, be as loud as you can. You want people to pay attention, and you want to make your feelings clear. People are cowards, and they won't interfere unless they are certain you need it."

I took a large step into her circle, and this time when she swung her staff, I blocked it with my sword and then disarmed her.

"No!" she protested, reaching for it, but I tossed her staff aside.

"You are losing control, milady." I approached slowly. I didn't brandish my sword, I just stepped closer.

She backed away. But not because she was avoiding the conflict. It seemed she was finally beginning to recognize her vulnerability.

"Don't leave your circle," I advised. "Stand your ground and get me out. Here." I tossed my sword outside the circle. "No weapons. Just me."

"But you're huge," she protested.

A smile tried to escape but I contained it. "You haven't even tried."

She breathed angrily through her nose a couple times and then came at me, shoving against my chest. "Get out! Get out!"

I let her propel me back, but I went slowly, forcing her to exert a tremendous amount of energy.

After giving me a final shove that pushed me over the boundary of her circle, she surprised me by stooping down and picking up my sword. Then she retreated to the middle of her circle and pointed the weapon at me.

She made an adorable picture. Her hair was coming loose and her chest rose and fell with her worn-out breathing. Best of all, she looked fierce and determined, like she might actually be willing to fight. That was good. It was what she needed. Never mind that the way she held the sword was all wrong and I'd be able to handily disarm her and have her flat on her back in no time at all if I tried. That wasn't the point. If she had any hope of learning to defend herself, she needed that fierceness.

I nodded in satisfaction. "Well done. You used the tools at hand." A small smile pulled at her lips.

I swapped the sword for a staff and we worked on her grip. I did my best to ignore the flashes of fire that burned through my gut every time I had to touch her hands. I had no right to feel anything for this girl except respect and a willingness to help her.

It was almost a relief when I noticed the sun setting. "Let's head back to Bridgefield. I wouldn't want you to be out after dark." I couldn't help my

smirk as I looked at her. "You never know what sort of ruffians might be wandering the woods at night."

She rolled her eyes but smiled as she handed over the staff.

We walked back, and when we encountered the stream, I offered a hand to assist her again. The moment I let go, I scrubbed my palm against my outer thigh, trying to get rid of the want that made my fingers curl, trying not to notice the way her hair fell from its pins and her cheeks flushed with the effort of training.

I cleared my throat. "You should probably..." She looked at me and I pointed a finger at my own head, then at hers. "Your hair has come loose."

"Oh." She stopped and took a moment to poke and prod and finger her hair back into place. "Better?" she asked.

I nodded and we walked on. "So," I started when my curiosity got the better of me. "Is the unwelcome nobleman still around?" Of course, I knew he was because my mother made the meals, but I wanted to know Miss Rose's feelings on it.

"Yes. I believe he'll stay for at least a few days."

"And will you have to visit with him?"

She shook her head. "He's here to see Lord Rockwell, not me. It shouldn't be a problem."

I cut my eyes over and noticed she looked less confident than she was trying to sound. Hopefully a few days was all it would be since she was clearly uncomfortable, but from what my mother and sister had said, the nobleman in question was a perfectly pleasant fellow. I still wondered what she disliked about him, but it wasn't my place to pry.

We reached the back garden, and I gave a little bow of farewell and watched as she climbed the steps up to the veranda and disappeared inside.

I turned in the direction of the kitchen, anxious to fill my belly with my mother's wonderful cooking, but someone called out behind me.

"You."

My face puckered, an automatic response to Lord Rockwell's condescending tone. But I schooled my expression and straightened my spine before turning to face him, trying to look respectful without looking like I was being prideful. With my size, it was a hard balance. "Yes, my lord," I answered, noting that he was accompanied by his wife and a man who must have been the nobleman Rose was trying to avoid. They were coming out of the gardens.

Lord Rockwell's eyes studied me, then flicked to the door that Miss Rose had retreated through before returning to me. "Might I ask what you were doing with my wife's cousin?"

Curious that he wouldn't just call her by her name. "I encountered Miss Rose as she was walking the grounds, and since the sun was setting, I offered to escort her back to the house."

He continued to stare in silence, like he believed if he looked hard enough, I'd crack and reveal that I was secretly having clandestine meetings with the noblewoman who lived under his roof. Granted, I was, but not for the reasons he would assume.

Finally, his stance relaxed marginally. "Very well. Just be sure that's all it ever is."

I bowed my head again. "Of course, my lord."

I stayed that way with my head bowed as the trio went past me toward the veranda.

"Your cousin is visiting as well?" the nobleman asked Lady Rockwell.

"She lives here. She and I grew up together, and she's become my dearest friend, practically a sister," Lady Rockwell said as they went inside.

Curious. The way Miss Rose had talked about him, it had sounded like they knew each other. So then, why did the man not seem to know her?

Roslyn

Admittedly, there had been a moment halfway through my first training with John when I thought I was crazy for even attempting to learn defensive skills. But that trick he'd come up with, creating the circle and making me defend it, had succeeded in pulling out a modicum of fierceness. I was so used to trying to fade into the background that standing up tall and loud in defense of myself felt foreign and nearly impossible. Yet, when he'd prowled around me and then forced himself into my space, it had worked. I'd imagined how I would react if it were Lord Farbury approaching with ill intent. I'd imagined him as Neil or Everett, and something inside of me had woken up. Granted, it wasn't a very large something. I was under no delusion that I would suddenly be a warrior queen on the morrow, but perhaps my training wouldn't be totally useless, and that was a comfort.

The next day, I was once again closeted in my room, embroidering the sleeves of a gown, when someone tapped at my door.

"Who is it?" I asked.

"It's Lisette," she called.

I quickly crossed to the door and unlocked it so that she could slip inside.

"Are you getting tired of hiding away?" she asked as we went to sit by the window.

"I've managed to find a few things to occupy my time."

"I know you weren't here yesterday. Edmund sent a maid to find you for dinner, but they couldn't find you."

I smiled at that. Last evening, I'd taken my drawing supplies and snuck down to the kitchen. I was lucky to find John there, and he'd helped me get a plate of food and then found a lamp so that I could eat in the old wing in peace. Then I'd spent several hours drawing in the lamplight. Part of me had wished John would join me, but after he'd spent so much time teaching

me, it felt wrong to impose further. So I'd sat by myself in the abandoned wing and found comfort there, then I'd returned my plate to the kitchen and taken the servants' stairs up to the second floor and my room.

"And hopefully I will not be found by anyone but you until he is gone. Which reminds me." I braced myself for bad news before I asked, "Did you ask how long he's staying?"

"He leaves the day after tomorrow, at first light."

I let out a huge sigh. "Oh, good."

"Yes. He said he's delayed his return long enough, and three days with us is really all he can spare."

I blinked hard, surprised that my overwhelming relief would cause tears to sting my eyes.

Her gaze was concerned. "Was he one of the boys who would torment you?" She had been aware of a little of what I'd gone through while it was happening, but she hadn't known the real extent of it until I'd moved in with her and her father.

I shook my head. "No. I don't think he ever liked me, but he wasn't... hateful, the way some of the others were."

"I'm sorry his presence causes you so much distress. He's actually"—she gave a little shrug—"quite charming."

I chuckled a little at that. I was terrified of a charming man simply because he was from my home country.

"It actually surprises me that he and Edmund get along so well. Lord Farbury has an easy manner that is quite the opposite of Edmund's seriousness."

"And how are you handling having a guest in your new..." I hesitated to say home, so instead chose, "surroundings?"

"It's gone off rather seamlessly."

"You sound surprised by that."

"I am. These servants have been left largely to their own devices for years. Yet, the house and grounds are well maintained, the staff is well trained, and even an unexpected guest did not cause a noticeable disruption."

"And what of the quest you've been given?"

"Quest?" She smiled at my choice of word as she sank into a chair with a sigh. "You mean trying to repair the family reputation and prove that we care?"

"Yes. That. Has Lord Farbury's arrival caused delays?"

"No. It's going...well enough, I suppose. Edmund met with the constables and other local leaders to ask what was needed and start the process of appointing the next magistrate."

"Isn't it usually the senior-most constable?"

"Normally, yes. But all of the most well-seasoned constables were arrested alongside Magistrate Reeve. So there aren't many left that are even trained for it, much less qualify for such a lofty promotion."

"That is a conundrum."

"I believe the best course of action would be for Edmund to ask for his father's input and perhaps some suggestions for candidates, but you know how Edmund feels about asking for help."

"It's not his strong suit," I agreed. "So what will you do today?"

She sighed. "Now that we've shown off the house, Edmund wishes to go riding."

"In that case, I'll be sure to find something indoors to do."

Lisette went on her way, and after I'd readied myself and given the others sufficient time to leave for their ride, I went downstairs, mostly just so that I could be somewhere other than my room.

I chose the sitting room, which was close to the stairs and also had a view of the stables so that I might see when the others returned. And since I was alone and feeling keenly the precariousness of my situation, I decided to confide in my parents.

March 12, Century of the Lion, Year 87 My dear Mother and Father,

I have decided to take matters into my own hands, at least as much as I can. I have found an instructor who is teaching me the art of protective defense. I know that might sound strange and out of character, but even as I long for home and wish to return, I cannot help the trepidation that consumes me. So I'm doing all I can to be prepared so that if the threat to my life lingers after I return home, I will at least have some idea of how to protect myself.

I hope.

It might be a complete waste of time if I can't stop trying to avoid actually engaging with my opponent.

"Ugh." I dropped my head onto my hands where they rested on the writing desk. I couldn't send this to my parents. I couldn't tell them that I was scared to come home. They were so certain that my safety would be guaranteed as soon as the king had another heir. It felt wrong to give them the burdens of all my doubts. They had enough to worry about. Tomorrow, I would just have to redouble my efforts in learning to protect myself and hope that eventually it would make a difference.

John

We'd started today's training by having Rose defend her circle again. I was hoping that the more informal approach would allow her to be more in tune with her instincts, and to trust them. Yet she was still so reticent that I felt I had to play the bully.

"I don't want to hurt you," she said with a worried crease between her adorably animated brows.

"I'm not going to let you hurt me, Rose. I defend myself against opponents far closer to my size and with years of skill on a regular basis. You aren't going to hurt me. Now fight back." I snatched the end of the staff that she held tentatively in front of her and yanked it up and over my shoulder. She didn't let go, which made me proud. But it also meant that she was propelled into my chest. I caught her around the waist with my other hand out of instinct. For a moment I froze as I fought the urge to pull her even closer. Instead I tightened my grip but turned my face away from the scent of her hair. "What now?" I demanded, my voice harsher than I'd intended. "If I were someone to fear, you'd already be hurt by now. What can you do? Think of something."

The staff was pinned between us, and she reached up and grabbed the top part that rested on the front of my shoulder and yanked it to the side, right toward my face.

I pulled back, but the staff still clipped my chin. I barely felt it, but I released her, letting her have the victory. "Well done," I said as she stumbled back.

She stared at me, breathing hard.

I swallowed. This woman had no clue the power that her bright blue eyes held.

"I hurt you," she said.

I couldn't help the grin that curved my lips, nor the chuckle that rumbled from my chest at the idea of her hurting me. "I promise you didn't."

"But you're bleeding." She pointed at my chin, her eyes pinching with remorse.

I lifted a hand to my face and my fingers came away smeared with the smallest bit of blood. "It's a scratch." I shrugged and wiped my fingers on my trousers.

"But—" That momentary fierce streak that had flashed across her face was gone, and now her hands fidgeted. "You should take care of it. Put something on it."

I sighed, knowing I'd lost her concentration. I was positive that any training we tried to do now would be useless. This tenderhearted girl was so distracted by a mere scratch on my chin that she was unraveling. I wanted to tell her not to worry about it and insist that we move on, but there was something in the way her hands curled at her sides so tightly that I wondered if her fingernails were digging into her palms. I reeled in the brusque response that waited on my tongue and instead decided to do something completely different. "Very well. I'm certain there is a salve in the stillroom at Sutton. Emeline is used to treating the kinds of scratches and bruises we all get from training."

She nodded. "Good. I'll let you go then."

"Uh-uh," I chided when she tried to turn away. "You have to come with me."

She looked confused, but her body seemed to relax just a little. "I do?"

I smiled inwardly at the fact that she didn't even try to argue with me on this point. "Yes. If you're going to train, you should see how we handle little incidents like this." I held out a hand toward her. "Come, I'll introduce you to Emeline."

She hesitated, her eyes going from my hand to my face and back again. I nearly retracted my hand, worrying she would think I was being too forward.

She eventually stepped forward and slipped her hand into mine. I tugged her in the direction of Sutton Manor, wondering if she would keep her hand in mine the whole way and swallowing at the thought.

My question was answered when I helped her over a fallen log and she took the chance to pull her hand away once she was safely on the other side.

I told myself it was for the best, but I still missed the feeling of her small hand in mine.

She bent to pick a flower and held it to her nose as we walked.

We came out of the woods, and I noticed her nervousness as we passed by the stables and Ansel called out a greeting. I waved but said nothing, not wishing to draw the lad into conversation. I wanted to be sure that Rose made it into the kitchen. I had a feeling that meeting Emeline would be good for her, and if Cecily or Beatrice happened to be there...well, that was all the better.

As we approached the kitchen door, I could hear their laughter already. Good. I put my hand on the latch, but Rose stopped me with a hand on my arm. "Wait," she said. "I don't want to interrupt anyone."

I raised a brow. "I thought my scratch needed tending." "Well, yes, but..."

"I promise we aren't interrupting." I opened the door and stepped inside.

The familiar sight that greeted me made me glad that I'd decided to come here seeking help for my "wound." Emeline was cooking, of course. Cecily sat on a bench, looking over her two small children who played on the ground, and Beatrice sat at the table, a cup of tea in her hands.

Roslyn

I stepped tentatively inside, trying to stay behind John and perhaps go unnoticed. There were three women in the midst of easy conversation. The young lady who stood at the counter baking was younger than I would have expected. One long, blonde braid fell down her back, and an apron covered her large stomach. She would have a baby soon, no doubt. The woman who sat at the table had gray hair covered with a mop cap, and a chatelain hung from her waist, proclaiming her to be the housekeeper. The woman who sat with two children at her feet had auburn hair and held herself with a grace that seemed familiar. A drop spindle was in her hand, and there was a pile of wool on the table that she was drafting onto the spindle. On closer inspection, I noticed that both her children held their own spindles, likely to discourage them from trying to grab their mother's work and ruining it. The warmth suffusing the room left me a bit speechless. It was like walking into a comfortable hug, except that no one was touching me.

"Good evening," John greeted easily.

"Evening, John," the woman with the spindle called, keeping her eyes on her work.

"Who've you got there?" This question came from the older woman, who was leaning to the side in order to see around John and look at me.

John stepped aside and put a hand behind my back, letting it hover close enough that I sensed it even though he didn't touch me. "This is Miss Rose."

"Are you the one John's been teaching?" the pregnant cook asked, dusting the flour from her hands.

"Rose," John said, "this is Emeline." He gestured toward the cook, then pointed to the woman spinning yarn. "Cecily. And this is Beatrice," he ended by gesturing to the older woman at the table.

"A pleasure," I said.

"Likewise, milady," Emeline said and dipped into a curtsey.

"Welcome," Beatrice said with a simple nod of her head.

"I'm sorry," Cecily said, her hands and attention already well occupied. "I know I should be proper and curtsey, but—"

"No, please," I insisted. "Don't interrupt your work on my account."

"Saints, John," Emeline said as she went back to portioning dough, "I didn't know you were teaching a lady."

"Oh, I'm not..." My weak objection trailed off.

John shrugged as he said to the ladies, "She claims she's not."

"Hmm," Cecily said, her eyes bouncing back and forth from her yarn to her children. "Claims, does she?"

My mouth quirked to the side. Why did I feel like I was being lovingly teased and called a liar at the same time?

"Oh, leave her be," Emeline said as she gave Cecily a meaningful look that Cecily didn't see. "We all like to have a secret or two, don't we?"

Cecily just smiled and shook her head, then pointed her chin at the two children. "This is Miles and Charles, by the way."

I waved as the little one, who looked to be about two years old, grinned and then threw his spindle across the floor.

"I've got it," John said, crossing to where it had bounced into a corner.

"So what brings you in?" Emeline asked. "Did you need something to eat?"

"Always," John said as he grabbed a biscuit from the basket on the counter and ate half of it in one bite. Then he picked up the spindle and

walked it back to little Charles. "But we actually came because Miss Rose inflicted a grievous injury upon me and insisted I take care of it."

I folded my arms over my chest. "You make me sound silly."

John looked like he was going to apologize, but Emeline spoke up first. "Trust me, you're not." She looked at her hands, which were covered in dough, then at Beatrice. "Beatrice, could you—"

The kitchen door that led to the rest of the house opened and another maid stepped in. The moment her gaze landed on John and me, she looked timid and uncertain, even going so far as to back up a step. Odd that she would retreat; John and I were the ones who didn't belong here.

"Hello, Nellie," John greeted before tossing the other half of the biscuit into his mouth.

Nellie immediately ducked her head, but then looked up shyly. "Evening, John."

"Nellie," Emeline said. "Perfect. John has a scratch that needs tending." She nodded her head toward a door on the other side of the room. "Would you mind?"

Nellie's cheeks went a little pink. "Course not."

"We really don't need to take Nellie away from her duties," John said.

Beatrice pierced him with a look. "Go on, John. You know better than to leave a cut unattended."

He rolled his eyes. "It's not a cut. It's a scratch."

"Do you want to tell your mother that when it gets infected?" Beatrice asked.

John raised his hands in defeat. "Fine, fine. But only because I'm afraid of you, Bea," he said with a wink in her direction. Then he turned to the young maid. "Lead the way, Nellie."

She turned and walked quietly toward the other side of the room. John followed after her, then moved quickly so that he could pass her in time to open the door and hold it for her. They both passed through and the door clicked shut behind them.

I was left standing there, feeling...unsettled? Perhaps the maid was shy in general, but I was fairly certain it was John alone who had made her blush. Did the girl have feelings for him? Did he return them? Were they whispering and holding hands on the other side of that door, enjoying just being close?

Good grief, why was I torturing myself with such thoughts? More importantly, *why* were such thoughts torturous? Yes, I valued our budding friendship, but I certainly didn't have any *claim* on him.

"Ugh." Emeline let out a groan, which thankfully interrupted my runaway thoughts. "I'm still jealous that I can't fight anymore, but I don't miss the nicks and bruises."

I stared at her, shocked. Emeline was...tiny. Short and small-framed. Her pregnant stomach practically took up her whole body. "You used to fight?"

Emeline just nodded, but Cecily jumped in. "And she was amazing. She could even give John a challenge."

Emeline chuckled. "Maybe two years ago, but not anymore."

"And you miss it? You enjoy fighting?" I asked.

Emeline nodded with a smile. Then she studied my face for a moment and asked, "You don't?"

I lifted my hands to my sides. "I don't want to hurt anyone, or even win. I just don't want someone to hurt me."

Emeline's expression said with perfect clarity that she knew exactly what I meant.

"We all do what we must to protect ourselves," Cecily murmured. Then she glanced over at me for just a moment before returning her attention to the spindle. "Come sit down, Miss Rose. Tell us about Bridgefield."

"Yes," Beatrice encouraged. "We've all been wondering how things are now that Lord Rockwell and his new bride have come. You are a relation of Lady Rockwell, are you not?"

"Cousins. Her stepmother was my father's sister," I answered as I sat down by Cecily, entranced as I watched the spindle dance.

John

Nellie fixed me up in no time, and I stood and headed for the door. "Thanks, Nellie."

"You're welcome," she said, her voice following me from the stillroom. I stepped back into the kitchen, anxious to be back with Rose and see how she was getting along with the women of Sutton Manor.

The scene that greeted me brought an instant smile to my face. Rose was sitting on the floor with Charles and Miles and appeared to be telling the women about how much she enjoyed living at Bridgefield.

"Well," Beatrice said as she sipped from her cup of tea. "I'm glad it isn't so gloomy as it used to be."

Rose looked confused.

"These three were servants of Princess Marilee when she was living there as Lord Damian Rockwell's wife," I explained.

"Oh, yes. He passed quite tragically, did he not?" Rose asked.

The three women all shot each other loaded glances, no doubt debating how to answer.

"Tragic indeed," Beatrice finally said with all the diplomacy and wisdom that her many years had afforded her.

Still, Rose looked confused, but the women were all clearly uncomfortable criticizing the former master of Bridgefield, so I changed the subject.

"How's Hunter doing, Emeline? I haven't seen him for a while." Emeline's husband was employed here, but unlike his wife, he had never taken to training with the rest of us, so I didn't know him as well as I did the other lads.

Emeline and Cecily both started sharing bits about what their husbands were up to, and I was able to sit back and just listen in for a while. Rose seemed to relax more and more, and I wished we could stay longer, but I was neglecting my duties and really did need to return.

I stood, wondering if I could slip away and leave Rose in the care of these women, but as soon as I stood, her attention came to me. "Do we need to go?" she asked.

"I need to get back to work, but you should stay here if you wish." She was standing before I had finished my sentence. "I'll go with you."

A part of me wished for her sake that she would stay. I had the feeling that she needed the kind of mothering that these women could give. The other part of me couldn't help but preen over the fact that she preferred to stay with me. "Very well. Come with me, my lady." I used the title on purpose, to see what she'd do, but it didn't seem to bother her. Perhaps she didn't notice. She just bent to run a hand over little Charles's head and waved to Miles. Then she tried to say a quick goodbye to the women, but Emeline insisted on coming around the counter to give her a hug and a small basket of baked goods to take with her. Cecily thanked her for entertaining her boys, and Beatrice invited her to come back anytime.

When I closed the door behind us, I heard her sigh.

I looked at her face and saw a wistfulness there. "Are you all right?"

A slow smile spread across her face. "They are lovely, aren't they? Thank you for bringing me here."

"Of course." I was glad for the warm welcome they'd given Miss Rose. It was like watching fairies at work, the way they had sprinkled Rose with love and caring.

"They do not think much of Edmund's brother," she noted. "Which makes me wonder how alike he and Edmund were."

I wasn't sure I should respond, but she remained stubbornly silent, so I pulled my words together. "I was not here when Damian was alive." It felt strange calling him Damian, but when talking about both the Rockwell brothers, I didn't want to fuss with Lord Rockwell and Lord Rockwell. "But I saw the pain he left behind. I believe Damian was a more...extreme version of Edmund."

"You don't like Edmund." It was a statement, so I didn't bother denying it.

What could I say about my employer? I supposed I could only speak the truth. "Lord Rockwell warned me away from you yesterday."

Her instant glare almost made me smile. "Edmund has no authority over me."

"You do live in his household."

"At his *wife's* invitation. I could leave at any time. And I don't want him pretending that he can decide who I do and do not associate with."

Fascinating. I'd had to goad her into defending herself physically, but she didn't hesitate to stand up for herself with words. "Well, he might not have any authority over you, but he has plenty over me."

Her eyes saddened. "Do you hate that?"

Her sincerity and immediate understanding made my throat tight. "More than you can possibly imagine."

"Is it normal for servants to dislike their employer, or is Edmund just a particularly difficult person in all circumstances?"

I let out a sigh. "In general, he's not a bad employer. Probably better than most. But he and I..."

Her brow shot up. "Yes?" Her face was filled with curiosity.

My lower back tensed, and I rolled my torso, trying to stretch it.

"You're holding a story there." Her gaze was a little too knowing. "What?"

"The way you moved just now," she said, pointing to my back. "Something is hurting you."

It seemed an obvious observation, but her concern was sweet. "Just some tension."

"It's a story that needs to be told, buried in your muscles," she said as if it were obvious.

What an odd thing to say. My brow pulled together as I looked at her. "You think there's a story in my back?"

She nodded. "We're full of stories. And painful stories that we hold on to will cause physical pain."

"That's..." I didn't know what I thought of the idea. Didn't we keep our stories in our heads and our hearts? What did my back have to do with anything?

She looked away. "Sorry. It's just something my mother always talked about."

I didn't want to dismiss the idea, though it did seem a bit odd.

"What happened between you and Edmund?" she asked, returning to our original topic.

I looked down at my boots, wondering how much to say and how to say it. I decided to just jump into the crux of the problem. "He reminds me of my father."

The way her face transformed made it clear that I had greatly surprised her. "Your father?"

I nodded.

"What about him?"

"My father was...tumultuous."

"Oh..."

"He could be fun and adventurous, taking me fishing or hunting one moment, and then turn mean and critical—threatening—the next." I was proud of myself for finding the words to explain something that was so deeply wounding to me.

"That must have been awful."

I nodded. "He did the same thing to my mother, and I could see the way it jerked her heart around. The hope that swooped in when he was kind. The fear that returned when he would slam a cup down on the table."

She chewed on her lip for several seconds before asking, "Did he hurt you?"

I shrugged. "Not much. He rarely resorted to physical violence. Only enough for us to know the threat was real."

She shook her head and blinked her eyes. "I'm so sorry."

"It's fine. It was mostly just intimidation. He was a very tall man, so he specialized in berating us while he loomed above with all his height. He would sneer and push his face so close that I couldn't make my eyes focus."

Her mouth twisted to the side in a tight, lopsided frown.

"Then he'd laugh it off and pat my shoulder as if he'd just told a good joke. I used to call him the two-faced demon. Jolly and fun, or snarling and mean. No in-between." I tapped my hand against my thigh, taking courage before I said my next words. "Lord Rockwell can be like that."

Her brow and her mouth were both in a deep frown as she looked at the ground ahead of us. "Yes, I suppose he can. He's never been violent though, never even threatened it."

I tipped my head in acknowledgement of that. "And for that, I give him credit. And it took me a long time before I saw his darker side. At first I was drawn to him. I looked up to him."

Her eyes pulled up to meet mine in surprise. "You did?"

I nodded. "I was eleven. Small for my age. My father called me puny and shook his head on a daily basis. So when Lord Rockwell asked me to help him with a task—a task he claimed he could only give to a strong, trustworthy young man—I fell over myself to do it. He praised me and kept giving me assignments. The idea that I, a small kitchen boy at the time, could become a trusted servant to the lord of the manor himself left me elated."

"Of course it did."

Her immediate understanding meant a great deal to me, but I couldn't help the self-deprecation that came with it. "In the end though, he was just using me to betray someone else. And when I was caught, he was not kind about it."

"I'm sorry he didn't treat you well."

I gave a little shake of my head. "It all happened long ago. I doubt he even remembers it."

"And your father, did he...pass on?"

I smiled at her delicate wording. "No. He just left."

She looked over my large frame. "And did he ever get to see how notpuny you became?" she asked with a smile that immediately lightened the oppressive mood that had settled over me.

"Yes, he did. That's one of the reasons he left."

Her eyes widened. "How so?"

"My father was tall and could certainly be imposing."

"You got your build from him?" she guessed.

"I got my *height* from him, but he was not all that broad," I clarified.

Understanding dawned in her eyes. "You got bigger than him."

I nodded. "When I was fifteen. And not just in height. After training with Falstone for several years, it became clear that my father was no longer a physical threat to me. So when he would get angry and try to tower over my mother or sister the way he used to, I would just put my hand on his shoulder, give it a firm squeeze, and say, 'Pops, why don't you take a walk?' or 'Why don't you have a seat?' or something. It didn't matter the words. The point was that he knew I wouldn't put up with it. I kept putting myself between him and my family, and he knew he couldn't win. Not when I was bigger, faster, stronger. Not when I was trained to *protect*."

She drew in a long slow breath, and I wished I knew what it meant.

"Anyway," I continued, "after more than a year of not being able to assert his dominance over the rest of us, he left. He tried to make my mother feel bad, told her that clearly she didn't need him so why should he stick around? I honestly think he expected her to beg him to stay."

"But she didn't?"

"She didn't say a word. She'd been taking care of herself and us on her own for years. My father had only been a hindrance for some time."

"Was she happy to see him go?"

I thought about that, about how complicated the answer was. "No, not happy. Relieved maybe. But he was still her husband, and he was still our father, so even though she let him go, she still cried that night."

Her face was puzzled. "Why?"

I shrugged my shoulders. "Probably the same reason Gretchen and I did. He was our father. And the good times...they'd been really good. They just never lasted." In truth, it had been crushing to have him leave. As much as I told myself I should be glad for it, it still pierced me to the core to realize that he didn't think we were worth making any kind of effort. The backand-forth of fun Pops and scary Pops was terrifying but also provided me with constant bits of hope that someday he'd change for the better. Having

that hope vanish was much harder than it should have been. His abandonment was devastating at the same time as it was a profound relief.

Roslyn

Lying in bed that night, I stared into the darkness above and thought about all the things John had said. It was good he had opened up to me about it. He'd told the story of his pain, or at least some of it. And as he'd confided in me, I'd seen his tension ease.

I kept imagining a younger version of John defending his mother and sister from the cruelty of his father, and then suffering under that cruelty before he was old enough to fight back. It struck me once again just how lucky I was to have parents who adored each other, who cared for and protected me. Yes, there were those who threatened my well-being, but none of those people were within my own family, and that was a gift.

I admired John for his resilience under such unfair circumstances. I also admired him for other reasons. The way my heartbeat had sped up when he'd declared that he was trained to protect. Stars, it had been...attractive, and so very masculine.

It would be two more days before we had another lesson. I looked forward to it, probably too much.

I woke up early just so that I could watch as Lord Farbury's things were packed into a carriage and he drove away. As far as I could tell, I had managed to keep him from seeing my face for the entirety of his visit. A sense of pride settled over me. I'd protected myself. I may not have done it with a staff or a sword, but I'd found a way to keep myself and my identity safe. As much as I sometimes regretted my need to hide, I was still grateful for it.

Now I could return to the comfort that I had found here at Bridgefield. I didn't have to run and hide. I didn't have to shut myself in this room.

Funny. I'd always viewed my chambers as a place of solace when I'd lived at the palace. It was the only space that was mine, and I had always

had plenty to do. I would embroider, draw, read, or make lace, but here at Bridgefield, I would much rather be outside, among the trees, listening to the song on the breeze and discovering new flowers.

I took breakfast downstairs with Lisette and Edmund, and there were only a few awkward moments. Edmund entered when I was already in the midst of eating. "Decided to join us once again?" he commented with a lift of his brow.

"Yes, I am much recovered," I said with a smile. I'd decided before coming down that this was the approach I would take if Edmund was curious about my absence.

"Recovered?"

"I've been unwell for the past several days."

"Were you?" He sounded skeptical. "Why was I not told?"

"There was no need to bother you with such a trivial thing. I was not truly ill, and I had no wish to put a damper on the visit from your friend."

He seemed unable to come up with a response. The idea of Edmund involving himself in my well-being in any deeper way than a vague interest would be completely out of character for him, and we all knew it.

"Don't worry, dear," Lisette jumped in. "I've been checking on her regularly to be certain all was well."

His only response was a grunt, and he spent the remainder of the meal ignoring both me and his wife. I was annoyed on Lisette's behalf, but happy to return to the norm.

It was a surprise, later that morning, when Edmund told us he had to go into the village for another meeting with the local lawmen, and he invited us to go with him. "I'm certain there are some shops you'd like to visit."

Lisette and I agreed to go, knowing full well that he wished for his wife to go out, be seen, and make a good impression. We were happy to oblige and went to change clothing. If we were going out in public, Lisette had to look like the future duchess that she was, and I had to look like I was worthy of being her closest friend.

It turned out to be an enjoyable outing, and we spent a good deal of time in a furniture shop, imagining different pieces of furniture in different rooms but ultimately leaving empty-handed. I was impressed with the way that Lisette held herself. She was confident yet humble, and she did not shy away from engaging with those we came across.

It was mid-afternoon when we returned to Bridgefield, and I was more than ready to change into a more comfortable dress and go outside.

I left the house and went out into the grounds, away from relations and servants, walking until I knew there were no prying eyes. I picked flowers. I ran through a field of wheat. I talked to whatever birds and critters crossed my path, because no matter what anyone else said to make me feel silly about it, I knew it was the polite thing to do.

I listened to the song in the breeze, and I started to spin.

John

She had to stop doing this.

Not that I wanted her to stop. No, in fact, I was completely mesmerized, but that was the problem, wasn't it? Miss Rose was dancing among the trees again. Humming again. Except this time, she kept pausing and then restarting. As I watched, I thought perhaps she was trying to remember a certain sequence of dance steps but was having difficulty.

I wanted to stick around so that I could see the moment when she finally remembered the last few steps, but just like before, it was not polite for me to be standing here staring. I needed to be on my way, but before I could convince my feet that they needed to turn and leave, Miss Rose's gaze fell on me and she stopped mid-twirl.

I froze, as though that would somehow make me invisible, and stared like a fool. If I'd been more in control of my faculties, I might have just given a smile and a nod and been on my way, acting as if I'd just been passing by. But no, instead I stood stock-still and just kept staring.

Wonderful impression, that.

Rose, the dancing maiden, blinked in surprise as she returned my gaze, and for several uncomfortable seconds, there was nothing but silence between us.

"Well, don't just stand there," she finally said, a very slight smile curving her mouth.

"I beg your pardon?" I asked, my voice rough. She seemed much more able to recover from our odd meeting than I was.

"It's been a long time since I had a partner to dance with. Would you mind?" Her question was asked with all propriety, and she held her hands demurely in front of her as if she were gracing a grand ballroom with heavy

drapes and beautiful finery, instead of standing in the forest with two simple braids in her hair.

"Oh," I said, reclaiming my faculties and doing my best to imitate her easy manner. "Certainly." I walked forward several steps until I stood directly in front of her, then (ignoring my hot neck and dry throat) I reached for her.

She took a step back. "No, no. You must ask me properly first."

I raised my brow. "You realize that in my world, asking at all IS asking properly?"

She suppressed a smile. "Humor me."

I fought my own smile, but one corner of my mouth tipped up. "You'll have to tell me how." I was acting more ignorant than I truly was. I'd spent enough time around Princess Marilee and Sir James to know exactly how a gentleman asked a lady to dance, but something about Rose's bossiness made me wish for more of it.

"It's not difficult. You bow while holding out a hand and say, "Might I have this dance?"

I did as she instructed, wondering at what point she would realize I was not an equal dance partner and scurry away. "Might I have this dance, fair maiden?" I asked with all the haughtiness I could muster.

She dipped into an elegant curtsey. "Thank you, good sir." Her fingers were long and delicate as she placed her hand in mine, ignoring the dirt that was almost always there and smiling as she stepped into my arms. I'd noticed during our training that she was taller than average, which suited me just fine since I tended to tower over everyone.

"I don't know fancy dances," I confessed as she stood in the circle of my arms, bright and lovely-smelling and eager to dance—with me. Stars above, what had possessed her to ask *me* to dance? Teaching her to fight was one thing, but this felt...intimate.

I was shocked when my confession caused her eyes to brighten even more. "Oh good. Will you teach me one of your dances?"

My fingers flexed where they rested on her waist, excited by the idea. "Of course, my lady. Though you'll have to loosen up a bit." I took hold of her hands and gave them a shake, making her arms wiggle back and forth. "Our dances are not nearly so stiff as yours."

She laughed and allowed me to pull her into a rather familiar dance position. "The beat will be *one*, two, three, four, *one*, two, three, four," I

said, setting a quick pace.

She nodded.

"We'll both take four steps in that direction"—I pointed our clasped hands to my left—"and then four steps in the opposite direction, like this." I pulled her along, reciting my one, two, three, fours as I stepped quick and light in one direction and then the other. Once she'd gotten the rhythm down, I started to vary our direction. So instead of going back and forth along the same line, we ended up making a star as we covered a much broader area.

I pushed her into a quick spin and she laughed. "You're right. This is much less stiff than I'm used to."

I grinned silently, gratified that I could make her laugh with such carefree abandon.

"Now two spins to conclude."

She happily complied, her skirts flaring around her. When we came to a stop, I stepped back, holding only one of her hands as I bowed. She curtsied in return, and when we both straightened, I cleared my throat, determined to do something other than just stare. "So tell me, what brings you out dancing in the trees?"

"Oh," she said as she turned her face into the breeze and pushed a loose lock of hair behind her ear. "Do I need a specific reason?"

"I suppose not," I acknowledged.

She looked back at me. "And what are you doing? Have I pulled you from your work?" A little frown creased her brow.

"No. I just finished planting the flowerbed on the east side of the house, and now I am headed to clear a small dam of branches that's blocking the flow of the stream."

She chewed her lip for just a moment, then asked, "Do you need help?" Was she offering? This girl continued to surprise me. "I can handle it well enough."

"Yes, but...I've delayed you, so it's only fair that I help you catch up with your work. Plus, you've devoted so much time to helping me train..."

My instinct was to reject her offer, but I stopped myself. Something in her face and voice told me that she wanted to help. Maybe it was boredom or curiosity. Whatever it was, I found myself wanting to say yes.

"If you wish to go wading through the stream, I certainly won't stop you. Perhaps you can do all the heavy lifting and I will stay dry on the shore," I teased.

She shocked me by responding with, "Wonderful! Lead the way."

I sputtered for a moment. I thought my teasing might make her blush, or that she'd tease me in return. I hadn't expected her to take my suggestion seriously.

But I loved that she had, so I just nodded and pointed through the trees. She skipped off in that direction, leaving me feeling like a puppet on strings, following after her.

"Does the stream get blocked often?" she asked over her shoulder.

I caught up with her so that I could walk at her side. "Not too often. But during the rainy season when the storms knock things around, I check it regularly."

"Could something bad happen if you left it?"

"There's a small chance that the wheat fields could flood, but that's unlikely. I also want to be sure that it's flowing well so that Sir James has plenty of water for his horses. But mostly, I just like keeping things the way they are." I gave a shrug, wishing that I could tell her there was some essential, heroic reason for this task. Then I had to wonder why I wished that.

"Could the flooding damage animals' homes?"

I grinned, glad that she wasn't looking up at me. "Yes, it could."

"Then it's a good thing you have my help."

I just chuckled. Of course Miss Rose wanted to protect animals' homes.

When we reached the portion of the stream where the branches had piled up, I was only half surprised that Miss Rose sat down and started taking off her shoes. Then, true to her word, she gathered up her skirts and waded into the water.

"Tell me what to do," she said, ignoring the water that was halfway up her calves.

I removed my own shoes and stockings, unwilling to let her be in the water on her own. The last thing either of us needed was for her to return to the manor house drenched. So I waded in beside her, close enough that I would be able to lend a steadying arm if needed.

"Now we just start pulling on branches and see what comes free," I instructed.

"Very well." She reached for one of the thicker branches and started pulling.

"And we have to be sure not to let the branches get swept away either, otherwise they might cause another block," I warned.

"Yes, yes," she said, giving the branch another tug. After a moment, she looked up at me with a mock glare. "Aren't you going to help?"

Honestly, I'd been more concerned with making sure she didn't fall into the water, but if the lady wanted help...

Just as I was about to take hold of the same branch, it broke free and the water tried to sweep it away and out of her grasp.

"Oh no," she said in alarm, still clinging to it as it pulled her along.

I lunged forward, catching her around the waist with one hand while grabbing hold of the branch with the other.

She laughed as she regained her balance, and we pulled it toward the shore. We set it down together, and when I turned to look at her, her smile was radiant as she continued to chuckle. "See?" she challenged. "I told you I needed help."

I smiled and shook my head. "Just don't let yourself be swept downstream."

"I would never," she replied with a sassy lift of her shoulder.

She waved her hand through the air and stepped back into the water, heedless of her skirts this time.

It only took us about ten minutes to work the branches loose and pull them onto shore, but by the time we were finished, her skirt was soaked to her knees and my stomach hurt from laughing.

That same bubbling joy that I'd seen in her when she was dancing came out here in the stream as she helped me with a menial task, and I was captivated by it.

"Thank you for your help, Miss Rose."

She smiled at me from where she sat by her shoes and pushed a loose strand of hair off her forehead. "I know you would have been lost without my assistance."

"Undoubtedly," I agreed with a chuckle. "I'm sure Tyson would have found me wringing my hands and crying for help if you hadn't been here."

She crinkled her nose in an adorable way and shook her head at my teasing words. "I'm fairly certain I was more a hindrance than anything, but thank you anyway." She put her second shoe on and then looked around. "I suppose I should get back for dinner."

"And I will do my best not to foul things up too badly while you are gone." I offered her a hand, which she took, allowing me to pull her to her feet. "Have a good evening, Miss Rose."

She looked up at me, and I could have sworn that a blush swept her cheeks before she stepped back. "You as well, John."

She walked away, stooping to pick wildflowers as she went.

I grinned. She was always doing that.

Roslyn

The hem of my dress was heavy with water, but by the time I'd made my way back to the house, I had a giant bundle of flowers in my hands and several more tucked into my hair. I stepped inside and had the misfortune of running into Edmund. Normally I wouldn't have minded, but knowing that he had tried to warn John away from me made me less tolerant than usual.

Still, if I could be polite to animals, I could be polite to my cousin's husband. "Good afternoon, Edmund."

"And you, Rose." He eyed the flowers in my hand with skepticism. "You have an admirer?" He tried and failed to sound casual about it.

I laughed, finding his misunderstanding of the situation to be genuinely humorous. "Hardly. I am more than capable of gathering flowers on my own." I brought them to my nose and inhaled deeply. "I appreciate the variety of wildflowers that Bridgefield has to offer. It's been a long time since I could gather such a bundle."

"Oh." He seemed surprised, and also suddenly uninterested. "Well, good. I'm glad you like them." He walked away without another word, and I happily went to the kitchen to request a vase for my treasures.

The next day, I went to meet John, making sure to carefully avoid the killdeer nest as I went.

I made sure I was on time, especially since I fully realized that we had not made much progress since he'd started teaching me, and that was entirely my fault. Today I was determined to do whatever John asked of me, even if it seemed hard, or scary, or just like a bad idea. With that determination, I was anxious to get started, but when I checked the watch dangling from the chain around my neck, John was already seven minutes late. Had he forgotten?

It was only a few minutes later that I heard someone bustling through the forest and looked around, expecting John. When a young woman approached instead, I couldn't help the frown that tugged at my lips. But when she looked up and gave a jaunty wave, my consternation turned to curiosity.

"Hello!" She grabbed a fistful of skirt and jogged the rest of the way over to me, a wooden sword slapping against one leg and a staff in her hand. "You must be Rose," she said after coming to a stop in front of me.

"Yes, I am."

"I'm Gretchen." She stuck out her hand and I shook it, because what else could I do in the face of such enthusiasm? "I'm John's sister."

"Nice to meet you."

"John got caught up working on something with Harlow. He's the stable master."

"Oh," I said as keen disappointment sliced through me. "So he won't be making it?" I didn't know if I was more disappointed to miss my lesson or to miss time with John. It was probably best not to examine that question too closely.

"He might show up later, but no guarantees. He told me you're wanting to fight, and I told him I could come teach you some things."

My brow fluttered in surprise. "Oh, well..."

"Don't worry. I know what I'm doing," she said with a cheeky turn of her mouth.

"Oh, I know. I've seen you."

The way her face brightened, I would have thought someone had bought her a pony. "You have?"

"Yes," I confessed, a little embarrassed. "Actually, it was watching you and the other young lady fight that gave me the idea in the first place."

"Really?"

I nodded.

She took a deep breath and I could practically see her swelling with joy and pride. "Well then, we should get started." She took the staff and handed it to me. "We use wooden swords to practice so that we don't kill each other."

"Yes, I know."

"Right. You've already been practicing with Johnny." She nodded and then moved to face me, leaving enough space between us that even with our swords fully extended, they would not have clashed. "Let's start with the strike from above. Did he teach you that?"

"He tried to."

"Did he fail?"

"No, I did," I told her with a shake of my head. "I couldn't get myself to..."

"Attack?" she supplied.

I nodded.

"You'll get it," she assured me. She showed me the same motion that John had demonstrated the first day he'd tried to teach me, and I tried to imitate her.

"How long have you been practicing?" I asked.

She tried not to smirk, but it was a losing game. "Going on six years now."

I pulled my chin back, startled. "Six years? How old were you when you started?"

"Seven," she answered with a grin.

"So you're only thirteen?"

"Near thirteen. How old are you, anyway?"

"Seventeen."

She nodded in acknowledgement. "All right." She adjusted her stance and held her sword up horizontally in front of her head. "Now you're going to strike my sword."

"Oh."

"Right in the middle here, using the motion you've been practicing. Go ahead."

My nerves shot up, but I shoved them down and did as she asked.

She shook her head. "Harder than that. You barely tapped my sword. Come on now."

Gretchen turned out to be a good teacher. I felt comfortable with the move fairly quickly. Though that caused her to look at me funny. "So why couldn't you do this with John?"

I'd been wondering the same thing and thought I had the answer. "You already have the sword up to block my blow. John just asked me to strike at him and trust that he would get his sword up in time."

Gretchen rolled her eyes. "Sometimes he doesn't even realize he's showing off. It just comes naturally."

That was a curious thought. "I don't think he's a show-off," I said.

"Trust me, he is. Right, Miriam?" she called to someone behind me.

I turned to see John walking toward us, alongside a beautiful woman with fiery red hair. A quiver was strapped to her back and she held a bow in her hand.

"Certainly," the redhead answered Gretchen. "What am I agreeing to?"

"That John is a show-off!" She tossed the insult with a grin.

John just shook his head, but the redhead looked at him as though actually considering how to answer. "Yes," she concluded. "I suppose he is a bit of a show-off."

"What?" he asked, offended. "I am not."

"We all have our weaknesses," she teased.

He narrowed his eyes at her, and I started to feel like I was intruding. "Like being a pickpocket?"

She looked aghast and amused at the same time. "Really, John?"

"Tell me I'm wrong," he challenged.

She rolled her eyes. Their easy banter made my heart squeeze a bit. Who exactly was this girl?

When John turned to look at me, he saw the confusion on my face and started making quick introductions. "Miss Rose, this is Miri."

"Miriam," she corrected. "Nice to meet you."

"You as well," I said with less confidence than I should have had.

"Miri works with Emeline in the kitchens," John explained, twirling his staff. "We all tried to convince her to learn the sword, but she decided she prefers archery."

I tried not to dwell on the fact that John had a nickname for Miriam, and instead marveled at the fact that so many of the servants had taught themselves to fight. The combined strength of the Sutton and Bridgefield servants might have been considered a small army. I smiled at that idea.

Miriam started heading away from us. "I do prefer archery, and I have to get in my practice now, before Emeline has her baby and I have to take over in the kitchen."

"And I'm certain your instructor has nothing to do with the appeal of 'practicing,'" John said with a raised brow.

She laughed as she walked off, hollering back to us, "They're equally appealing."

I looked over at Gretchen, a question on my face.

"Rowan is the one that teaches her," she said with a cheeky smile. "They're sweethearts."

"Oh." What a relief. But it shouldn't have been a relief, because I needed to convince my insides that they should not object to seeing John with other girls. If he wanted to spend time with and show off for Miri and Nellie and anyone else, I needn't have an opinion on it.

Unfortunately, my heart felt like it had a very strong opinion about it. What a mess.

"How are things going here?" John asked.

Gretchen put one hand on her hip and cocked it to the side as she gave her brother a critical look. "They're going very well since I'm not showing off."

John narrowed his eyes as her. "Why the sudden accusation that I'm a show-off?"

John

I truly wanted to know. Gretchen had meant it, and while I'd admit to showing off on occasion, I didn't think that warranted the accusation that I was a show-off. Especially not when she was saying it in front of Rose.

"Because, you halfwit, you've been trying to get Rose to strike at you without blocking first."

"What...are you talking about?"

Gretchen did her signature eye-rolling movement. "Watch," she said, then raised her sword horizontally above her head. "Go ahead and strike, Rose."

It took Rose a moment to follow Gretchen's abrupt instructions, but then she did. She struck at Gretchen's sword and did so with force and good form. How befuddling. Why hadn't she been able to do that with me?

Gretchen turned to look at me. "You can't expect her to swing at someone's head and just trust that they'll be able to defend themselves. You might know that you'll get your sword up in time, but she doesn't know that. She's not like me," she said with her snarky smile. "I wouldn't mind knocking you in the head, but she obviously does."

OH. She was...absolutely right. "Well"—I rubbed my fingers along my forehead as heat climbed my neck—"I really am an idiot, aren't I?"

Gretchen said a resounding "Yes" at the same time as Rose said, "No."

I would say this for little sisters—they keep you humble. Though in my defense, I really hadn't been showing off. I'd just never taught anyone before, and I'd never even practiced with someone as averse to violence as Rose was. I'd been practicing and sparring with the others for so long that I could hardly even remember the way Falstone had taught me in the beginning.

There was a part of me, the part that hated it when Gretchen managed to actually humiliate me, that wanted to walk away and either try again tomorrow or tell Gretchen that she should take over. But I wasn't a quitter, and getting my nose bent out of shape over my sister pointing out something that was true would make me a true halfwit. So I took a giant gulp and swallowed my pride, forcing myself to see the positive in the situation. "Gretchen, thank you for pointing that out. Maybe you can stick around for a bit and let me know if I'm making any other stupid mistakes."

My response surprised my sister, and she winced. "I was too harsh, wasn't I?"

I laughed because it was true. Gretchen told the truth and had no tendency to soften the blow of it. "Maybe a little. But you were right."

She turned to Rose. "I do that sometimes. Mama says it's not going to get me any friends."

Rose smiled. "I don't mind it."

I cleared my throat, needing to move on from all the honesty. "You staying, Gretch?"

She agreed and soon enough, Rose was striking my own sword as I held it up. From there, it was easy to move on to having her be the one to block. She held her staff at the ready while I brought my sword down on it, allowing her to experience the impact and get used to the feeling.

By the time we headed back to Bridgefield, I felt like we were finally making progress.

My Roslyn,

It's happened, my dear! The queen is with child. I must confess that I have known this for some time, but I have not wanted to give you false hope. If anything should have happened to the baby or the queen, I did not want you to suffer the heartache of having such hope taken from you. I had even considered not telling you until the child was born healthy, but I cannot keep it from you any longer. My dear, the queen is less than two months from her time of delivery. Only two months, Rosie!

I am almost afraid to hope, but this long-awaited child may actually allow you to return home. By all accounts, the queen is lovely and strong and has had no trouble with carrying it so far, but we can never be sure until the child is safely arrived.

We have so much reason to hope, but my heart still aches for what you've had to endure, for the separation we've all suffered. And though your father tells me that I am not responsible for this situation, it's difficult to believe it. I am the cause, after all. I'm sorry you have to suffer the consequences of my station, no matter how unfair it may be. Let us hope this new babe allows you to come home, and that all those who wish you harm can forget about you entirely.

Love always, Mother

I sat with the missive in my hand, frozen in place. It only had the name Rose and the direction on the outside. No family crest stamped into the wax, and I knew that my parents paid a trusted servant to send them.

I'd only been at Bridgefield for a month. This was the first letter I'd received from my parents since I came here, and the news was... astounding. I'd hoped for it for so long that I'd stopped actually expecting it to happen. It wasn't until the page started to tremble in my hand that I

dropped it to my lap and forced myself to take a deep breath. The queen was going to have a child—soon. And that child, if hale and hardy, would in all likelihood quench the worry that I might someday assume the throne. And if those who hated me had no reason to fear my succession, they would no longer see me as a threat. And if they no longer saw me as a threat, they would not have reason to harm me.

Right?

I'd lived with the knowledge that people wished me dead for so many years that it was difficult to comprehend that it could actually come to an end. And the idea of actually returning to Saldine was...terrifying.

And suddenly, learning to defend myself became even more important. In a matter of months, I might be able to rejoin Saldian society. And when that time came, I could not assume that all threats would cease. By all logical standards, the likelihood of them wanting to hurt me should decrease dramatically, or even disappear entirely. But who was to say those who threatened the life of a young girl were logical? I couldn't possibly trust that their ill will would be entirely gone. And if some fool decided to run at me with a knife, I wanted to know what to do.

I didn't want to be forced to disappear in my own home. I didn't want to be so insignificant that I was forgotten. I didn't want to be disposable.

I wanted to be a person who mattered.

John

Rose bent over, resting the staff on her knees and breathing heavily. "Why can't I get this right?" she almost shouted.

"You've only been practicing for a few weeks, and you're picking it up quickly." I couldn't understand her frustration.

She straightened, shaking her head. "Not quickly enough."

"Why is this so important?" I asked, wondering why she was torturing herself with something she didn't enjoy.

"Because I want to go home," she said with a sort of aching desperation.

"What home? The palace in Winhaven?" I knew that was where she'd resided before coming here.

"No." She gave a dismissive wave of her hand. "That was never my home."

Now I was curious. "Where is your home?"

"Saldine."

I frowned in confusion. "You're from the kingdom of Saldine?" She nodded.

"How did you end up here?"

She lifted one shoulder. "I came to live with Lisette."

That explained why she was here, but not why she had left her home. She was being evasive, and I suddenly needed to know more about her. "You are Lady Rockwell's cousin," I said, following a hunch. "You don't object when I call you 'my lady.' Am I correct in assuming you are of the noble class?"

She looked at the ground as she chewed her lip. "Her stepmother was my father's sister."

"That doesn't answer my question." If only she knew that her evasion made me more curious, not less.

She sighed in resignation and closed her eyes. "I'm the daughter of a duke." She opened her eyes to look at me.

I fell back a step. "Ah." That knowledge left an uncomfortable tightness in my chest, and I didn't fully understand why. The past month had allowed Rose and I to become comfortable with one another, to become *friends*. But this... It took me a moment to find any more words. "So you are not just nobility. You are one step away from royalty."

She narrowed her eyes at me as if I'd insulted her, though I couldn't imagine why.

"So then," I wondered aloud, "why can you not return home?"

She stabbed the forest floor with the end of her staff. "There is some conflict between my father and some of the other high houses of Saldine. My parents were worried about the effect it would have on me and thought it best that I leave for a time." Her explanation sounded stilted and not quite genuine, but I could think of no reason for her to be less than honest with me.

"How long have you been away from home?"

She swallowed and blinked several times. "Almost four years." She shrugged, but I saw the way her chin trembled for only a moment.

What would it be like for a young lady of consequence to be thrust out into the world at such a young age? "You haven't seen your parents in all that time?"

She shook her head, suddenly looking worried. "John, you can't tell anyone."

"Tell them what?" She was starting to worry me.

"That I'm the daughter of the duke, that I'm Saldian. People don't know that. It's important that they don't. There's a reason I go by Miss Rose."

"But—"

"Please, John. Not even Edmund knows. Just promise."

My chin pulled back. Edmund didn't know? "All right," I acquiesced. The last thing I wanted was to cause her any more distress, but how could Edmund not know? Did she not trust him? "But why?"

She gave a sharp shake of her head. "Please. Just..." A flash of hurt or sadness crossed her face. "Just teach me. I want to go home," she said with a helpless shrug. "But I can't until my parents call for me, and in the meantime I'd like to learn something useful."

Her words weren't nearly satisfactory, but as a common groundskeeper, I was hardly in a position to demand more information from the daughter of a duke. No matter how pretty she was. No matter how kind and engaging and...effervescent. No matter how much she felt like a friend.

She wanted to learn something useful, and I had the ability to teach her.

I stepped forward, resigned to pushing aside my curiosity and focusing on her training, but then I noticed the way she rubbed at her left wrist. "Is your wrist hurt?"

"What?" She looked down at her hands and pulled them apart, as if surprised to see that she'd been rubbing her own wrist. "Oh. That."

My brow furrowed. "Are you hurt?" I asked again.

She shook her head. "No. Not really."

"What does that mean?"

She chewed on her lip a little bit. "I told you about the stories we hold."

"Yes..." I remembered the odd comment she'd made about how I had a story stuck in my back. Something about my dislike of Edmund.

"Well," she said, holding up her wrist, "I have a particular story here that hurts me once in a while."

"About what?" I asked, mostly excited by the prospect that she might be willing to confide in me more.

She looked torn, like she was desperate to tell me and yet holding herself back. Luckily, she decided to speak. "There are two earls in Saldine who

hated my father more than anyone else. And because of that, their children do not like me."

So she told me the story of her aching wrist, and with each word, my heart broke a little more.

Before

Saldian Palace Roslyn, Twelve years old

Panic and tears clogged my throat, and I could feel the bruises forming on my arms from where they'd grabbed me.

I missed the days when they would only pull my hair.

"This isn't funny!" I shouted, yanking on the rope that bound my wrist.

"We only tied one wrist," Everett said as he backed away and started up the steep stone steps. "I'm sure you'll get out, eventually." His grin was cruel.

"Come on," Everett's sister Nina said, pulling on his arm. "Let's go."

Neil still lingered, looking at me. For one tiny moment, I thought he might decide he was being too cruel and untie me. Then a dirty little smirk curved his lips and I recoiled. "I still think we should tie both her hands."

My heart dropped and I bit down to keep my chin from trembling. I should never have followed them down here. I should have stayed safe in the library. But when they had run past, shouting about exploring the dungeons, I'd been curious. I'd never seen the dungeons of the Saldian palace. They were mostly used for storage since the jail had been built.

And now I was tied to the wall.

"Neil, come on," Nina insisted. "Before someone finds us."

He gave me one more sneering, arrogant smirk before following the other two up the stone steps, taking their torch with them.

My breathing was quick and sharp as I frantically picked at the knot around my wrist. There were narrow slits in the wall, enough to let in some faint light, but the shadows were deep and terrifying.

I screamed for help.

I yanked against the binding on my wrist, but that only cinched the rope tighter, so I kept clawing at the knots.

When my screams finally brought someone down to the dungeon, my wrist, my fingers, and the rope were all bloody.

My parents were furious, but the earls claimed I had just overreacted to a simple game that had gone awry. They claimed I was being dramatic and trying to turn them against their own children.

We almost didn't attend the next royal gathering, but once my parents' initial anger had faded somewhat, they decided our situation would not improve if we hid away. We must attend and do all we could to combat any rumors thrown our way.

Now

Roslyn

It had been stupid of me to confide in him. It was dangerous for him to know. Dangerous for both of us. But I'd held on to every piece of my real identity for so long that I longed to let some of it out, to let someone know and hopefully care. Once I had told him who I was, that I was the daughter of a duke doing my best to hide, I hadn't been able to stop myself from telling him more. I'd told him about some of the worst things Neil, Everett, and Nina had done to me. And the horrified look on his face had been vindicating. It had been awkward trying to move on from my sad tale and continue training. But I believe my story helped him understand just how much his lessons meant to me.

The next day, a storm came through, rattling the windows and bringing endless drafts through the house. I stayed tucked away in my room, a chair pulled in front of the fire that Everly had lit, writing to my parents and reading a book that I'd found in the library a few days ago but that I'd never opened. If I hadn't been so distracted by my own whirling thoughts, I might have finished it. But whirl they did. I wondered what my parents would do when I finally returned home. I wondered if being older would make the other nobility meaner or kinder. I wondered what kind of life I might lead if I ended up staying here. What future could there be? And could I stomach the idea of being dependent on Lisette and Edmund's hospitality when I had a home of my own and tracts of land waiting for me in Saldine? I imagined all the things I could do with that land if given the chance. Could I turn it into the sort of haven that Bridgefield was to me now? What kind of courage would that take? And would the people of Saldine ever afford me that luxury?

I noticed her the moment she came out onto the veranda. Not that she made any noise. Despite the fact that I was in the middle of trimming a branch halfway up a tree, my eyes were pulled in that direction, and there she was, walking across the grey stones with a book in her hand.

I smiled. I couldn't help it. Rose made me smile. And though I knew that my admiration would always be one-sided and go absolutely nowhere, I still smiled.

She was relaxed and unhurried as she walked down the steps and into the paths that wound through the garden, and for that I was grateful. The things she'd confided in me the day before had ripped at my insides. I ached for all she had suffered and admired her even more for her resilience.

I let the small saw that I held dangle from my fingers as I rested my forearms on the branch in front of me and enjoyed the view. Her dress was green, the color of dragon baby hydrangeas. She wore her hair in long braids that coiled around her head. She reached out the hand that wasn't holding the book and let her fingers skim over the blossoms that bloomed along the path, plucking one and bringing it to her nose. Then she found the bench that sat just below the veranda and settled herself on it before opening her book.

Saints, I wanted to keep staring at her, but this tree wasn't going to trim itself. Last night's storm had blown through with such ferocity that many of the trees had broken branches. Some had fallen to the ground and I'd already hauled them away. Others had fallen only to be caught in the lower branches of the trees. And still others were cracked and drooping but hadn't broken all the way through. So I returned my saw to just such a branch and resumed my cutting.

When the saw sliced all the way through, I disentangled the branch from the leaves around it and then dropped it carefully to the ground.

I looked over to see if the noise of falling branches had startled Rose and instead found her staring up at me. The book was still open in front of her, but she was looking over it and directly at me.

She pulled her gaze away the moment her eyes caught on mine. I couldn't help the wicked grin that curved my mouth. So that's how it was to be? Very well. I was more than happy to play this game.

I held the saw out and allowed it to fall to the ground as well before pulling myself higher. There was a large branch stuck in the boughs above my head. It was dry and brittle and needed to come down before it was shaken loose and landed on some unsuspecting person.

When I was close enough, I found a comfortable perch on the boughs and then couldn't resist glancing down. Once again, I caught Miss Rose with her eyes directed upwards instead of down at her book, and she was biting her lip in a way that made my stomach tighten.

I quickly focused back on my work. If the lady wanted to admire a man doing a bit of manual labor, I was more than happy to provide. I reached for the branch, resisting the urge to flex more than was necessary. *Just do the work*, I told myself. *No need to preen*. I had no desire to become an insufferable show-off, but the way she was looking did wonderful things for my ego.

After I'd dislodged the large, brittle branch, I had to pull it down with me as I descended. The trees surrounding me didn't allow enough room for me to toss it outward and trust that it would find the space to fall freely to the ground. By the time I made it out of the tree, the sweat was already starting at my hairline and my lower back. Normally I would have tossed off my shirt at this juncture and worked without it, but the thought of doing so now when I had a captive audience made me oddly nervous.

I was nervous around a woman. Gads, what did that mean? She was the daughter of a duke. It meant nothing.

Instead, I took the rag that I'd tucked into my belt and dried off my face and hands before moving on to the next tree. As I walked, tucking the rag back into its place, I glanced over at Rose. Her whole face was hidden behind her book, but the way she held on to it was making her knuckles white.

Perhaps I shouldn't move on to the next tree. Perhaps I should take these branches to the burn pile now—the burn pile that was on the other side of the house and would require that I cross closer to her on my way.

So I bent to grab hold of the branches I'd taken down so far, shook my hair out of my face, and did my best to smother the grin that wanted to stretch my face. I didn't look over at her, but I could see enough in my peripheral vision to know that her eyes followed me. *Don't be arrogant*, I reminded myself.

As I drew closer, another figure appeared on the veranda, and I couldn't help but look at Rose to see if she could sense them approaching. But instead of her attention being on the newcomer, it was on me. And this time, she didn't look away when her eyes found mine. Heat burned low in my gut at the intensity of her gaze.

She didn't notice Lady Rockwell come right up to the banister and look down on her where she sat, and I wasn't about to let my eyes wander, not when she seemed just as content to stare at me as I was to stare at her.

"There you are," Lady Rockwell said.

"Hm?" Rose responded, practically jumping in her seat and dropping the book to her lap. She turned to look up at her cousin, her hands fluttering over the book and up to her hair.

"What brings you out here?" Lady Rockwell asked.

"Oh. Just the beautiful day." She threw a hand out toward the sky. "I thought it would be nice to read out here in the sunlight for a while."

Lady Rockwell turned her face toward the sun. "It is a lovely day." She looked down again. "What are you reading?"

"Oh, this?" Rose fumbled with her book.

I turned away to hide my grin and kept walking. I was just a groundskeeper, nothing more.

"It's, um..." Rose paused.

I glanced back just in time to see her look at the book's spine before reciting the title to her cousin.

Yes. Miss Rose was far too good for my ego.

Roslyn

I'd been thoroughly caught, but it wasn't as if I'd woken up this morning determined to ogle John. It had just...happened. The more time we spent together, the more time I wanted to spend together, but seeking him out for reasons other than training seemed ill-advised, which was how I'd found myself picking up a book from the library and wandering out to the back garden. When I'd looked out one of the back windows, I had caught sight of him and was immediately captivated. His loose shirt billowed in the breeze, and a rag was tucked into the back of his trousers for reasons that I could not guess. He had dropped several tools at the base of a tree before grabbing hold of a couple branches and pulling himself into it. The way he moved

with such strength and confidence as he scaled the trunk prompted me to take myself outdoors. I'd had every intention of actually reading, but the entertainment of watching him work had been so much more compelling than whatever story I'd grabbed.

The Seafarer's Might. That was the name of the book, and I told Lisette as much, right after I read it off the spine.

"Is it any good?" she asked from above me.

"Oh." I stood, deciding that it was time to go inside and away from John and his masculine virility. "I haven't gotten very far into it," I confessed as I quickly found the stairs and climbed them to join Lisette.

I had been staring at him. He'd looked at me and smiled, and I hadn't been able to look away. Saints, what would he think of me?

When I joined Lisette, I hooked my arm around hers. "Did you need me for something?" I asked as I tugged her inside.

"Nothing in particular," she said as a footman shut the door behind us. "Dearest," she said, looking over at me as we walked down the corridor, "you weren't actually reading, were you?"

The heat rose to my cheeks and I fought to will it away. I brushed at some invisible dirt on my skirt. "I may have been...a little distracted."

"A little distracted?"

"Yes." It was hard enough to admit as much without her looking at me like she knew I was a little strumpet who had been ogling the groundskeeper.

"By the large fellow, perhaps?"

I brushed at my skirt some more. "Perhaps," I said tightly. "Does he always look so...capable when he works?"

"I honestly couldn't say."

"Of course not." She was married after all, and probably older than John, and certainly less of a ninny than I was.

When I looked up, Lisette's eyes were sparkling with amusement, but then her brow furrowed. "You do remember why you are here, don't you?"

I snorted. "How could I forget?"

"No. I mean, your father fell in love with—"

"Stop," I said, halting our progress and turning to look at her. "Please, please do not lecture me about who I am allowed to love."

"But—"

"Am I supposed to regret my own existence?"

She looked startled by that idea. "Of course not."

"My life is challenging. I am perfectly aware that due to my parents' circumstances, it is an utter disaster at the moment, not to mention dangerous. But life is dangerous. And everyone is a disaster in their own way. Your marriage isn't exactly the stuff of dreams."

Sharp hurt contorted her features, and I felt awful.

I slapped a hand over my mouth and shook my head, shocked by my own words. "I'm sorry, Lisette. That was terrible of me. I didn't mean—"

"No, you're right," she said as she stiffened her spine and tried to smile. "I have no right to give advice on choosing a spouse."

It was the first time she'd admitted out loud that her marriage was difficult. "I'm still sorry," I said.

"I know." She took my arm and we resumed our walk.

I'd thought long and hard about my parents' decision to go against society's expectations. What it had meant for me. What it meant for them. But to wish they'd made a different decision would be to wish away my own existence—and my parents' happiness. And once I'd come to that conclusion, I'd realized that the problem wasn't with my parents' decision. The problem was with everyone who thought they had a say in it. The problem was with all the nobility who made themselves miserable for the sake of preserving their own self-importance.

People hated me. But at least life with my parents had been happy. More and more over the years, I'd seen how rare that was.

Roslyn

It was with extreme trepidation that I left the house to meet John for our next training session. I had not been subtle in admiring him the other day, and though he didn't seem to mind, I was a little worried that he might gloat, and I didn't think I could handle being teased by him—not when I admired him so much. And not just for his physique—which was impressive, yes—but because every interaction I had with him was warm and kind. He listened. He didn't talk down to me even though I knew I was an abysmal student. He had taken his sister's criticism in stride.

I crossed the stream and spotted John. When he looked up at my approach, his smile was easy. "Hello," he greeted, and the tension in my chest immediately eased. He held out a staff. "Ready?"

I dropped the bundle of flowers that I had gathered on my way and took it. "Ready."

As we started walking, he cleared his throat and said, "So..."

I looked up to see him trying and failing to keep a straight face.

"Read any good books lately?" he asked, unable to keep the wicked little smirk off his face.

I could feel the blush rising to my cheeks, but I refused to shrink. "Yes, actually. I read a marvelous one the other day about a man who died tragically when he fell out of a tree."

He burst out laughing, and I chuckled along with him. "How did he manage that?" he asked.

"Oh, the usual story. He was distracted by a devastatingly beautiful woman."

He snorted another laugh and shook his head. "Poor bloke."

He didn't say anything else about the way I'd stared the day before. We never addressed the way both our gazes had been constantly drawn back to

the other. And I knew that was for the best. He knew I was nobility, and I was fairly certain that made a difference to him. He probably believed that I thought of him as below me, even though he had started to become a good friend and the person that I most looked forward to seeing.

So I tried to keep my growing attraction to myself, knowing that no matter how much I might grow to care for him, I would be leaving in a matter of months, and I had a life waiting for me in Saldine. Hopefully.

We fell into a comfortable rhythm of training. I appreciated that he took his teaching seriously, while at the same time never being stern or disapproving. He was always encouraging, but he never shied away from correcting my mistakes.

But still, as the weeks passed, I didn't feel as if I was progressing fast enough. My mother's letters assured me that the queen's pregnancy was progressing well and that she was nearing her time. She might deliver in less than a month. That meant my reunion with my parents could be even sooner, but so would the inevitable confrontation with the earls of Malladon and Ravenna.

So I trained as often as he would let me, mostly because I was determined to defend myself, but also because it meant time with John. And I did improve. I became less reticent and a better student, but I still didn't like the actual fighting. So when I failed to perform a task well, I wasn't anxious to get better, I was just frustrated that I hadn't mastered it yet. And John couldn't help but notice.

John

"I would be able to help you better if I knew why you need this." We'd been meeting at least three times a week for nearly two months. She was committed, but nothing about the way she engaged indicated that she was enjoying it any more now than she had in the beginning.

"Who said I needed it?"

"You do. With all your determination and your frustration. I can tell this isn't a curiosity or something just to pass the time. You feel like you *need* to know these skills. If you tell me why, I can help you better."

She stayed stubbornly silent, staring at the ground.

"Who do you fight, my lady?" I asked, desperate for her to confide in me.

"Those who wish me dead," she said without missing a beat, her eyes still fixed on the ground.

I smiled at her jest. "And are there many of those?"

"At least two, but there could be many more," she responded, still not looking at me.

My smile faltered. She said the words in earnest, without even a hint of a smile. "Rose?"

She looked up.

"Are there truly those who wish you dead?" Surely not. Maybe she wasn't joking, but she had to be exaggerating at least.

She opened her mouth, then chewed on her lip in indecision before shaking her head.

The gesture was too serious, too unpracticed, too secretive. My stomach dropped. "Rose..."

"If—" she said, cutting me off. "If there are those who wish me ill, our time is better spent training me, wouldn't you agree?"

She wanted me to drop it, but that wasn't going to happen. "Are you in danger?"

She swiped the staff through the grass at her feet. "Not...imminently."

"But you are." I knew with gut-wrenching clarity that I was right. That was why she acted the way she did. That was why she insisted on learning to defend herself when learning was neither easy nor fun for her. She'd said her parents were worried about how their conflict with other families might affect her, but I had never considered *this*.

Her chin was stiff, as were her hands that gripped the staff with white knuckles, but she nodded.

I felt as though someone had jabbed me in the stomach with the butt of their sword, but I did my best not to overreact. I needed more information. "You're the daughter of a duke," I said as I tried to line up what I knew with what she'd just told me. "I'm not going to pretend to know the ins and outs of the upper class in Winberg, much less in a foreign kingdom like Saldine. But are you in danger for political reasons?"

Another stiff nod, and suddenly her eyes were shining with tears.

"What kind of danger?"

She opened her mouth like she wanted to answer and then stopped herself, looking off into the trees.

I tried not to be frustrated by her lack of answers. I could tell she was trying, so if I just asked the right question... "Is your life being threatened?"

Suddenly her eyes were fixed to mine and I saw a flash of fear there.

Saints, she'd been telling the truth. Someone wanted her dead. "Who is it?" I demanded. "And why? Who would go to such extremes?"

She gave a jerky shake of her head. "It's pointless to try to make sense of the political scheming of ambitious men. So, to answer your question, yes, I need this. My desire to learn to protect myself isn't fleeting. It's not a hobby for me or a passing fancy. It's something I need to learn."

"I..." What could I say? I'm sorry for your troubles? I hope you don't end up dead? I'd fought for myself and others on several occasions before, but this...staring into the eyes of a woman who was facing the reality of multiple people who would take her life if given the chance...I was at a loss. "Very well." My mind tossed around, reanalyzing what I knew and trying to come up with the most useful solutions. "Let me show you how to put a man flat on his back."

She let out an annoyed sigh. "Very funny."

"I'm serious."

She scoffed. "I'm not going to be able to do that."

"Trust me, you can. Should I grab Gretchen and have her demonstrate?" She opened her mouth but wasn't able to find a response.

"It's all about leverage. Trust me." I offered her my hand and she took it.

Roslyn

I had expected John to get Gretchen and bring her back to our spot in the woods. Instead, we'd headed back to Bridgefield. John stepped into the kitchen to ask for Gretchen's help.

She came out grinning. "John tells me you need to know how to flip a man."

"He still hasn't explained how that's possible," I said, skepticism clear in my tone.

"Trust me, it is," she said as she skipped along beside me.

"Come on," John prompted, crossing the Bridgefield grounds. "I certainly hope that Lord Rockwell isn't looking out one of those windows right now," he muttered.

"Why?" I asked.

He cut his eyes over to me and then quickly away. "He did warn me away," he said with a shake of his head.

Gretchen snorted. "And because it wouldn't be good to have his lordship seeing John leading you off to the stables."

"Gretchen," John said, exasperated. "You don't have to say everything that comes into your head."

She gave a shrug, looking not at all sorry.

When we were rounding the corner of the house, John spotted another young man digging in the dirt. "Tyson," he hollered.

The young man looked up and shaded his eyes with his hand.

John beckoned him over. "Come help me with something."

The young man's eyes went from John, to me, to Gretchen, then back to John before he grinned. Then he stood, dropping his gloves on the ground and swiping his hands across his knees several times before trotting over to join us.

"Miss Rose, this is Tyson," John said.

Tyson gave a bow and touched the brim of his hat when he reached us. "My lady."

I smiled and bowed my head but didn't bother to deny the title.

"This way," John prompted, and we all made our way to the stables.

"Why are we here?" I asked as we entered the pungent but well-kept space.

John used his height to look over the tops of the stall doors, finally stopping at the fourth one. "Here we are." He opened the stall gate, and when I came up beside him, I saw that it was not occupied by a horse but by a giant pile of fresh hay. "If you're going to flip a man onto his back, we'll need a pile of straw for him to land in."

"Wait a minute," Tyson protested, holding his hands up at his sides and backing up several paces. "I'm not letting you flip me," he said to John.

John smiled and leaned against one of the posts of the stall. "Not to worry. I won't be the one flipping you."

"I will!" Gretchen said with glee.

Tyson groaned. "That's not all that much better. Why can't she just flip you?" he asked.

"Because after you two provide a demonstration, Miss Rose is going to practice on me."

The way Tyson grinned and said, "Is she, now?" made my cheeks flush, though I couldn't say exactly why.

"Yes, and I'd rather not be tossed more times than necessary, so will you do me this favor?"

John seemed completely serious, but Tyson looked as if he'd just been awarded a handful of gold coins but was trying to hide his excitement, pressing his mouth together to keep from grinning. "Anything for a friend." Then he turned to Gretchen. "All right, you little savage, get close to the pile."

Gretchen skipped over and stood practically in the pile and turned to face Tyson.

He didn't give her any warning, he just moved forward like he was going to choke her. I was startled by it, but I didn't have any time to get truly concerned, because she immediately took hold of his arm and then tossed him over her back. Or at least appeared to. It was all too quick, so I wasn't sure how it had happened.

Gretchen stood straight, clearly energized by her success.

"Good. Now move through it slowly, step by step," John asked.

They did so a few times, and I was fascinated by the process. The way Gretchen grabbed his wrist with both hands, turned her back, yanked his arm forward and then threw her hips back was all brilliant. And she was only twelve! Tyson was likely close to my age, maybe a little younger, but he was certainly taller than me, and much taller than Gretchen.

"Is it hard?" I asked Gretchen.

"Not once you know what you're doing," she responded through her heavy breathing. "It takes practice to get it all down to one movement, but once your body knows what it's doing, it's really not bad."

They demonstrated for several more minutes, pointing out different aspects of it. "Are you ready to try now?" John asked me.

Tyson groaned as he got up from the pile of straw again. "Does that mean I can go?"

"Coward," Gretchen said under her breath with a chuckle.

"Savage," he tossed at her as he left the stall.

Gretchen grinned and climbed up onto the wall dividing this stall from the other.

John turned to me, a hopeful look on his face. "Ready?" he asked again.

I bit my lip. "What if someone were coming from behind?" I was stalling.

He nodded. "We'll practice that as well, but one thing at a time. Stand here." He directed me to stand where Gretchen had been.

I did, but couldn't help wringing my hands as John planted his feet in front of me. His eyes grazed over me, no doubt taking in my weak stance and nervous fidgeting.

"Actually," he said, "perhaps you should practice with someone smaller first."

My brow shot up. "Like who?" Tyson had left.

"Like me," Gretchen said, jumping down from her perch.

"I can't flip you," I said, taking in her thin frame and delicate features.

"Why not?" The corner of her mouth turned up.

"I'll hurt you."

"That's what the straw is for, Rosie." She put her arms out to her sides and fell back into the pile of straw. After climbing to her feet again, she grabbed my upper arms and had us switch places so my back was to the straw. "Go ahead. Try it. If I come at you like this, what do you do?"

She reached for me with both hands, but I couldn't do it. She looked so small, even with all her confidence and strength. "What if I pull your arm too hard and it hurts your shoulder?"

"She's done this plenty of times before," John said.

Gretchen nodded eagerly. "I do sneak attacks on Ansel all the time, just to be sure he's getting enough practice."

She looked so proud of herself, and I almost felt bad for the young man who had to contend with her on a regular basis. She was diabolical.

"Now, come on," she said. "Give it a try." She put her hand on my shoulder, in perfect position for me to take hold of it.

"I can't," I said, knowing it was ridiculous and feeling embarrassed that I had asked for their help but couldn't manage to take their instruction some of the time. Especially after I'd been doing so well lately.

Gretchen rolled her eyes in a big dramatic way and then launched into action. Before I knew it, she had reversed our positions, taken hold of my own arm, and yanked me across her back. My feet left the ground and I found myself flat on my back, cushioned by the straw pile, and in shock. Gretchen looked down at me with a smirk.

"Gretchen," I heard John scold before he came close enough for me to see him. He looked mortified.

I just let out a laugh. They were right. It was disconcerting and not exactly comfortable, but it hadn't hurt. "Fine," I said, rolling to my feet. "I take your point."

Gretchen looked triumphant. John looked relieved. He walked me through the steps again, and I managed to flip Gretchen over my shoulder and onto her back, but it was quite slow.

We practiced over and over. John kept asking me if I was ready to try to defend myself against him and I kept saying no. It wasn't so much his size that I was afraid of, though that was a factor. No, my real hesitation was simply the proximity that such a thing would require.

I was nearly ready to ask if we could stop for the day when Gretchen extracted herself from the straw and simply said, "That's enough for me. Best of luck, Rosie." She waved and bid me farewell.

The fact that she'd decided to call me Rosie made me smile.

"Well," John said, casting his eyes around the space that was now occupied by only him and me. "Perhaps that's enough for the day."

"Yes, thank you." I stepped out of the stall, suddenly needing a bit more distance. I pulled straw from my hair and dress. As I did so, the horse in the stall across from me stuck his head out over the gate, so I wandered over and gave him an obliging pat on the nose. "And what's your name?" I asked.

"Titan," John answered as he came up beside me. "He's my favorite mount."

The way he phrased it made it sound like he was used to riding horses, which surprised me. A groom would be expected to know how to ride, but a groundskeeper? "Do you ride?" I asked with a curious tilt of my head.

He nodded. "These three horses have lived here for as long as I've been here. And since the past seven years have left this house mostly empty aside from us, many of us took the opportunity to learn."

"The Rockwells just left them here?"

He shrugged. "They knew they'd be taken care of. Harlow is a dedicated stable master, and the grooms are skilled and love the horses."

"And if a few other servants learn to ride, what's the harm?"

He grinned. "Exactly. It's not as if they wanted to spend all of their time cooped up in only a stall and a small paddock." He spoke with such easy

surety.

"Do they long for adventure?" I teased.

"I'm not sure they've longed for it, but a couple of them have stumbled into adventure with the rest of us."

My curiosity was piqued. "What kind of adventure?"

"The kind where we had to chase down a band of peddlers to get Emeline back."

"What?" I asked, utterly astonished.

He just smiled in a way that spoke of understanding and experience. Experience that I didn't comprehend. "There's very good reason that I'm helping you train, Rose. I know the difference it can make. Emeline and Miri—they've both been in situations that could have left them...damaged beyond repair, but because they knew how to protect themselves, they're still here. And they're still happy." We were both lazily stroking the horse and our fingers brushed against each other, but neither of us pulled away. "I want that for you."

I swallowed, touched both by the sentiment of his words and the look of true caring in his eyes. "Thank you." I gave a little shrug. "I am trying."

"I know you are, and I admire you for it. You're doing something incredibly brave in the face of terrifying opposition."

I'd needed to hear that. One of the consequences of not being around my parents was that they didn't see when I faltered. The thing I knew for certain about my parents was that they wanted me to be hidden, out of the way, and safe. But my parents weren't here to hold me when the smallness of my life started to feel stifling. They couldn't comfort me when I was weak and crying. Lisette was there for me, but John's words filled up a space inside me that had been empty for a long time.

Roslyn

The Murrwood market was a delight. It reminded me of my time with Lisette before she'd met and married Edmund. We'd taken regular outings to the market near her home, as well as visiting regularly with her friends and the other townspeople, but once we'd moved to the palace at Winhaven, all such menial tasks had been delegated to servants and social visits became political maneuvering.

"How much for this?" Lisette asked as she fingered a delicate silk shawl.

"Three coppers, my lady," replied the woman behind the stand, who looked half-elated, half-panicked to have Lisette browsing her stall.

"A fair price, indeed. I'll take it." She pulled the coins from the pouch at her waist and handed them to the woman before gesturing to the guard who had accompanied us. He came forward and took the scarf, tucking it away in a satchel that hung from his shoulder. Lisette had a growing collection in that satchel. I didn't know if she truly wanted all the things that she had chosen or if she was simply trying to leave the market vendors with a favorable impression of her and, by extension, her husband and his family. I suspected it was a mixture of both.

As we continued on, there was a commotion up ahead. "What's that about?" I wondered aloud as laughter and excited voices reached our ears.

"Let's find out," Lisette said and led us in that direction.

It wasn't long before I spotted a familiar figure. I believed it was Falstone, the man who had trained John and the others. He was making his way through the crowd, trailing after a woman who was clearly highborn. Her clothing was fine and brightly colored. She had golden hair, half of which was braided intricately around her head while the other half fell in gentle waves down her back. Her smile was full and lit her eyes.

"That must be Princess Marilee," I commented, positive that I was right.

"Why do you say that?"

"Things the servants have said."

"Hmm." She seemed puzzled. "Edmund has made her sound rather unpleasant."

Not wanting to contradict my dear cousin's husband, I decided to concede. "I could be wrong."

Her Highness (for I truly did believe it was her) slowly made her way from one stall to another, greeting those around her, seeming energized by the general chaos and especially the enthusiasm of the young people who ran up to show her things. "Shall we say hello?" I asked. "You've been neighbors for nearly three months and still haven't met. Don't you think it's time?"

Lisette shook her head. "Edmund does not wish me to seek her out." She chewed on her lip and then looked over at me. "But you, you could greet her. You are practically a princess in your own right," she murmured.

I shushed her, even though her voice had been low. "Not really," I corrected. "And no one need know of my position."

She sighed. "I do hate it that people defer to me so readily and ignore you. They have no idea whom they are snubbing."

I smiled. "I appreciate your indignation on my behalf, but I assure you, I am perfectly content."

Just then, Falstone caught my eye. We'd never officially met, but I'd been around Sutton enough that I wasn't surprised he recognized me. I smiled and he immediately bent to speak in Princess Marilee's ear, pointing in our direction. She looked up, seeming thrilled when she spotted us, which was very strange. Then she took her skirts in hand and hurried in our direction.

"She's coming over," I said, a little panicked.

"I can see that," Lisette chuckled under her breath and straightened, waiting politely as Princess Marilee approached.

"Lady Rockwell," the princess said as she came close enough and slipped into a graceful curtsey. "Allow me to introduce myself. I am Marilee Sutton, your neighbor."

Lisette and I curtsied in return.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Your Highness. This is my cousin, Miss Rose."

She gave me a smile and dipped her head. "A pleasure."

"Likewise, Your Highness."

"I'm so glad that I ran into you," Princess Marilee said. "I've been hoping for a chance to visit, but I did not want to impose at Bridgefield."

"It would not have been an imposition," Lisette assured her.

Marilee gave a smile that suggested she did not believe her. "I appreciate you saying so. However, we are here now, so I must do something rather impulsive."

Lisette let out a little laugh. I guessed that she had taken a liking to Princess Marilee in the last few moments just like I had. "And what is that?"

"I must invite you to dinner tonight at Sutton Manor. Will you come?"

"Oh." Lisette looked just as surprised as I felt, but after a moment of thought, she failed to come up with any reasonable objections. "That would be lovely. I do not know if my husband's schedule will permit the visit, but Rose and I could certainly attend."

Her Highness looked genuinely relieved. "That would be delightful. And if your husband can attend as well, that's all the better." The way she said the bit about Edmund made me believe that Edmund's animosity toward this woman did not run one way. Still, she was doing her utmost to be polite, and I had to admire that.

Lisette and Marilee spoke for a while longer, arranging a time and other details.

"I'll let you be on your way," Princess Marilee said at our parting, "but I shall see you both this evening."

"We are looking forward to it," Lisette assured her before we continued on the way we'd been heading, and Princess Marilee passed us by to continue her own shopping.

After a few moments, Lisette squeezed my arm. "I do hope I haven't made a mistake."

"How so?"

"Edmund" was all she had to say.

I could only shrug my shoulders. "What were you supposed to do? Refuse?"

She nodded. "You're right. Surely Edmund will understand that I could not reject such an invitation."

I certainly hoped so, but after we had completed our shopping and returned to Bridgefield, I was just climbing the stairs to my room when Edmund's terse voice drifted up from the drawing room below.

I sighed and lowered myself to sit on the stairs so that I could listen without being seen.

"You agreed," Edmund started in a slow, deliberate cadence, "to have dinner with Mr. and Mrs. Sutton?"

"Yes. She was very kind to invite us," Lisette said in a falsely bright voice.

"Yes, I'm sure. Very kind." His footsteps clipped across the wood floor as he came out into the corridor.

"So then...will you accompany me?" I'd rarely heard Lisette sound so uncertain.

"Yes. Fine. Whatever you wish."

"Do you not wish to attend?"

"Of course I don't. I recall specifically asking you not to go visit Her Highness."

"I didn't visit her." I was impressed by how calm Lisette was. "I happened to meet her at the market. She was very kind, and when she asked us to join her, I could think of no reason to refuse. Should I have refused?"

He grumbled a sigh. "Of course not."

I stood just enough that I could look over the banister and see their interactions.

"Shall I go by myself?" Lisette's hands wound together in front of her. "Rose will accompany me, of course."

"I shall attend," Edmund said.

"I'd be happy to give your excuses if you would rather—"

"I shall attend," he said with finality.

Lisette looked hurt and confused, but finally she just nodded. "We leave at a quarter to five."

"Very well" was his only response before walking away toward his study.

Lisette stared after Edmund for several tense moments before taking a shaky little breath and crossing to the stairs. As she started to climb, she saw me there, waiting for her in the middle. I gave her a commiserating look.

She frowned. "I truly don't understand him sometimes," she said.

When she reached the step I stood on, I took her arm and we climbed the rest of the way together.

Everly poked, prodded, and adjusted my hair for what felt like the hundredth time. "It's lovely," I assured her, hoping that she would declare me finished so that I could go downstairs. My hair was done up in loops and braids, dotted with pearls.

She kept poking and inspecting. "We must be sure that it's perfect. You'll want to look your very best for Her Highness, I'm sure."

My mouth pulled into a frown. "I'm certain that if my appearance is good enough for Lady Rockwell, who will one day be the sovereign duchess of this land, then it will be more than good enough for a foreign princess." My tone was probably more severe than it should have been.

It struck me as odd that the servants here revered Princess Marilee more than they did Lisette. And if I were honest, I was a bit sore over it. Lisette was not just the mistress of this house, she was kind and gracious, and it hurt me to think that this princess, regardless of how lovely she might be, had usurped the position of admiration and respect that I believed my cousin deserved.

Everly finally took the hint and backed away. "Of course, miss. You look lovely."

I smoothed the fabric of my wine-red skirts and descended the stairs, expecting to find both Edmund and Lisette ready and waiting for me since my maid had taken so long on my hair. However, when I reached the drawing room, it was only Edmund who stood waiting by the shelf of spirits. He was sloshing liquid into a goblet and did not look happy.

I made a little noise in my throat to alert him to my presence, then said, "Good evening, Edmund."

He spared a glance at me over his shoulder and raised the goblet in salute. "Rose." Then he drained it.

I sighed inwardly, hoping that was the one and only drink he would consume before we left. "Will Lisette be coming down soon?" I asked.

"I would assume, since she's the one who wanted to attend this little soirée."

I was tempted to remind him once again that he need not attend if he didn't wish it, but he hadn't reacted well when Lisette suggested the same, and it wasn't my place anyway, so I bit my tongue.

Fortunately, I had only a minute or two to fidget before Lisette swept into the room, looking radiant and nervous. "You look lovely, Lisette," I assured her as Edmund drained another small measure of alcohol.

"Come along," Edmund prompted as he tugged on his vest and strode toward the door. "Mr. and Mrs. Sutton will be waiting."

We gathered our cloaks, and I followed after Lisette and Edmund as they walked out to the carriage and we climbed inside.

The horses pulled away, and a tense silence settled in until Lisette spoke up in a careful tone. "Darling, I do hope you will remember to address Sir James and Princess Marilee by their titles. It would not do to slip up and call them Mr. and Mrs. Sutton."

Edmund snorted. "The only reason he is a Sir is because he married her." "Yes, and the only reason I am Lady Rockwell is because I married you,

is it not?" she said in a conversational way.

He sighed and patted her leg. "Fear not, my dear. I shan't insult them."

"It's just that you've called them Mr. and Mrs. twice now—"

"I was raised in a castle, Lisette," he snipped at her. "You needn't remind me how to behave among society."

Her smile was pinched. "Of course, dear. My apologies. I think I'm simply nervous."

He huffed. "No need for that. There is nothing special about them."

Lisette's brow pulled down in a frown. No doubt she was thinking the same thing that I was. Making a good impression on Dalthian royalty was important by any standard, but since our sole purpose here was to repair the family reputation, it was even more important.

As we pulled up the Suttons' torch-lit drive, I had my first view of this manor in the moonlight. It was not nearly so grand as Bridgefield, but it appeared warm and inviting. As soon as we pulled to a stop, the door was opened by a waiting footman.

Once we'd alighted from the carriage, Lisette placed her hand gracefully upon her husband's arm and we all ascended the steps.

The chandelier in the entry made the marble floor glow, and I soaked in the warm atmosphere as our cloaks were taken.

"You've arrived!"

I looked up to see Her Highness descending the stairs. Her golden curls glistened in the lamplight and her purple and silver gown rustled with each

step. A gentleman, who I had to assume was Sir James, trailed behind her, his expression pleasant but his body tense.

She went directly to Lisette and took her hands in hers. "Lady Rockwell, it's so lovely to see you again. And Miss Rose"—Princess Marilee turned to me—"welcome."

"Thank you for the kind invitation," Lisette said.

Marilee nodded and turned to Edmund with a much more reserved smile. "Lord Rockwell. I'm happy to see you looking so well."

Edmund gave a stiff nod. "Your Highness." Then he turned to Sir James and a sneer curled his lip. "Jamie."

I was surprised, both by the informal greeting and the way that Edmund made it sound like an insult, especially after he'd told his wife that he knew how to behave among society.

Sir James held his composure, though his jaw tensed and his voice was cool when he said, "Ed."

"James," Princess Marilee said in a chiding tone. Clearly, there was a lot of history here, and none of it was good.

Sir James let out a sigh and turned back to Edmund, affixing a more pleasant expression on his face. "My apologies. Lord Rockwell." He gave a barely discernible bow. "Lady Rockwell." His bow was much more genuine. "Welcome to our home." He stepped back and gestured us inside. The smile he directed at Edmund was forced, but his expression softened when he turned to Lisette and me.

"Thank you so much for having us," Lisette offered as Sir James bowed over her hand.

Princess Marilee gestured to a doorway off to the left. "We can visit in the sitting room until dinner is served."

Edmund and Lisette moved toward the open doorway, and I stayed several steps behind. I was just barely able to hear Her Highness as she said in an undertone, "It has been six years, my darling."

"That doesn't mean he's magically turned into a good person. He treated you abominably."

"Still, we will be civil, won't we? His wife has done nothing wrong." "Of course," he murmured in resignation.

Their clandestine conversation did not put me at ease. What misery had Edmund visited upon these people? And more importantly, what misery might he have in store for Lisette? The thought made my stomach ache.

We all sat and did our best to maintain a polite conversation, but Edmund's expression of utter disgust was difficult to ignore, and his surly silence was the loudest thing in the room. How much had he drunk before we came? I could only imagine that he was quite far under the boot to be acting so uncivilized.

There was a general sigh of relief when dinner was announced.

It was a credit to their excellent upbringing that the princess, Sir James, and Lisette were all able to keep up a pleasant conversation during the meal, especially with Edmund looking unpleasant the entire time.

"And where did you grow up, Lady Rockwell?" Princess Marilee asked.

"Just outside Faehurst," she answered. "My father has a house in the country. And what of you, Princess? How does Winberg compare to Dalthia?"

"Both are beautiful in their own rights. While I do miss my home in Dalthia, I've fallen in love with Sutton Manor, and you would be hard-pressed to pull me away from it for more than a short visit."

"How convenient for your husband," Edmund muttered into his goblet.

I looked from him to Sir James in time to see Sir James's eyes flash. For a moment, I thought he would respond to Edmund's words, but then he seemed to decide against it.

"And how do you find Dalthia, Sir James?" Lisette asked, probably hoping to move on from Edmund's snide comment as quickly as possible.

"It's as my wife said, lovely. We enjoy our occasional visits, especially the chance to spend time with her family."

"Yes," Edmund commented, "royal connections must be maintained."

Sir James stiffened again, but before anyone could respond, Lisette jumped in again. "You have a large family, do you not, Princess?"

Dinner continued, and Edmund's few muttered responses were pointedly ignored.

It was an utter disaster, and I was mortified on Lisette's behalf. I could feel her humiliation, her hurt, and her anger even though she hid it fairly well.

Despite Edmund's abominable behavior, I was optimistic that we would end the evening and maintain some sort of dignity. It didn't matter that we were all desperately uncomfortable, I could tell that we all hoped to fake the pleasantries till the last moment. But then a footman went to refill Edmund's wine goblet. Apparently he didn't want any more wine, or he was just determined to be unpleasant. Either way, he pushed the servant's hand away, and because the footman had been mid-pour, wine splashed onto the table and Edmund's knee.

He shot to his feet with a curse, pushing the footman out of the way when he tried to help.

Edmund's reaction was dramatic and overdone, certainly, but the reaction of those around him was no less severe. Princess Marilee took in a startled gasp and went stiff, gripping the sides of her chair. Sir James stood, putting himself firmly between his wife and Edmund, and Falstone—who had been standing unobtrusively in the corner for the entirety of the visit—was suddenly at hand, placing himself beside Her Highness. He looked as if he'd like nothing more than to pummel Edmund.

Edmund, for his part, finished throwing his tantrum, brushed off his breeches with a napkin, and allowed the footman to clean up the spill on the table and clear away the goblet. When he went to sit down again, he finally noticed Sir James and Falstone.

He chuckled darkly. "Fussy little nursemaids, the both of you." He shook out a new napkin with a snap and laid it across his lap.

Princess Marilee's hands visibly shook as she set her napkin on the table and then rose unsteadily to her feet. "If you'll excuse me," she murmured and then walked stiffly from the room.

Sir James was only a couple steps behind and did not bother to excuse himself. He only turned to say, "Watch him, Falstone" as he hurried after his wife.

I was left stunned and speechless, and when I looked to Lisette, I could see tears of humiliation clouding her eyes. What had just happened? I didn't understand it, and that was more disconcerting than anything.

Roslyn

We didn't bother trying to salvage the evening. Once Sir James and Her Highness left the dining room, Edmund scoffed in disgust and said, "We're going."

Lisette and I had no choice but to follow.

The carriage pulled up to the front of Bridgefield, and Edmund got out in a huff with Lisette scrambling after him. I followed quietly behind Lisette as she hurried up the steps after Edmund. He didn't wait for a servant to open the front door for him, he just yanked it open and stomped through, throwing it closed behind him so that it slammed in his wife's face.

She growled in frustration and reached for the handle, but it opened before she could touch it. A startled butler stood on the other side, trying to hide his surprise but unable.

"Thank you," Lisette said shortly, breezing past him and walking toward Edmund, who was fighting to remove his overcoat while ignoring the footman trying to help him. "Really, Edmund, was that necessary?"

He managed to free his arms and flung the coat against a wall before whirling on her. "Necessary? *Necessary*? Was that dinner party necessary? No! But I went, because you asked it of me."

"And I am mortified by the way you acted," she said, her voice rising. I was proud of her for standing up for herself; she usually just tried to keep the peace when Edmund got angry. "You promised me that you would not insult them, and yet you had nothing but insults to give."

"What did you expect?" he said, curling his lip. "I made my feelings about the Suttons perfectly clear."

"Clear? Your feelings about this situation have been *anything* but clear. I know you are unhappy, but you haven't told me why. You haven't told me if

it's the house or the people. How was I to know that you hated your nearest neighbors?"

"I told you to stay away from the princess. Was that not clear?"

Lisette pursed her lips, then let out a little huff. "But you didn't tell me why, so I had no way of knowing if it was an offhand comment or something you truly wanted me to take to heart."

He stepped toward her, his eyes blazing as he shoved a finger in her face. "I do not speak just to hear myself talk, my lady. You would do well to take *everything* I say to heart."

Lisette glared. "And you would do well to remember that I am not one of your servants." She shoved his hand out of her face, and I cheered internally for her courage.

But then Edmund's face turned a mottled red and he grabbed both her upper arms in a fierce grip. "Do not test my patience."

My actions were involuntary. I didn't mean to get in the middle of their argument. I never made the decision to step up and try to pry his hands away from her. It just happened.

Not that it did any good.

My interference angered him more. He shouted in incoherent rage, releasing Lisette long enough that he could backhand me across the face.

Lights popped in front of my eyes and I blinked, realizing I was sitting on the floor, my hands having caught me from face-planting on the ground.

"Get out of my sight, both of you," Edmund raged from above me.

I felt Lisette hook her arm underneath my own, and she heaved me up. I did my best to help, but my head was spinning and everything sounded muffled.

"Come along, dear," she said as she hurried me away.

My head pounded, and I had difficulty making my eyes focus as she pulled me toward the stairs.

The butler appeared on my other side and took most of my weight, helping me up the stairs so that Lisette didn't have to. By the time we reached the top, I was recovered enough that I was walking on my own, but the butler still held a supportive arm around my waist.

Lisette came into my room with me and asked the butler to summon my maid.

When he left, she turned to me, her face ashen and shocked. "You shouldn't have interfered."

"He was hurting you," I muttered as I sat on the trunk at the foot of my bed, shaking in shock.

"And now you are hurt." She knelt down in front of me and looked at my face. "You should have let me handle him." Even as she tended to my bruised face, I could feel her hands shaking.

I grabbed her hand, forcing her to look at me. "Lisette, you must tell me. Has he ever done that before? Has he ever—"

"No." Her voice was a ragged whisper. "Never. We've argued, but he's never..." She took in a careful breath and then let it out. She pulled out a handkerchief and pressed it to my cheek, making me wince. It came away stained red. "I'm so, so sorry, Rosie."

I grabbed her wrist and tried to smile at her. "It's not your fault."

John

"Johnny!" I turned at the sound of my mother's voice. She was one of the few people who still called me Johnny.

"Yes, Mum?"

"Will you run to the Lockleys' cottage and get a salve from Anne? One for bruises?"

I wondered who had hurt themselves. It was after dark, after all. "Of course, but don't we already have one?"

She shook her head. "I used up the rest of it on Tyson the other day."

"Right. I'll be back soon." I headed for Sutton land, grateful for the moonlight as I fell into an easy jog. Mr. Lockley and his son, Rowan, were the gamekeepers of Sutton, while Mrs. Lockley had an extensive herb garden. Anne's knowledge of healing plants rivaled that of the local apothecary.

When I returned, I handed it over to my mother and she gave a grateful sigh. "Thank you. Now watch this stew while I go tend to Miss Rose."

Shock ripped through me, but she'd bustled off before I could find the words to ask why Rose needed tending to. My instinct was to run upstairs and check on her, which was insanity, of course. Nothing gave me the right to intrude on Lord and Lady Rockwell or any of their guests. I had no right to track Rose down, no matter how much I worried for her.

It took me a few minutes to calm the anxiety that had so quickly reared up inside me. Once rational thought returned, I reminded myself that it was likely a minor injury. A scrape or a bruise from some small accident, and I would do well to get out of the house before I let my imagination run too far.

I didn't see her until the next day. I was trimming the back hedges to the south of the veranda when she walked out. Her steps were slow as she turned to the north and walked along the veranda toward the stairs that would lead her down to the yard. I immediately dropped my sheers and jogged in front of the veranda so I could intercept her. She descended the steps and then turned toward the yard and consequently toward me. I had a smile fixed to my face, ready to greet her and ask after her welfare. But the moment I caught sight of her face, I stumbled to a stop. My smile dissolved and my mouth fell open in shock and empathy.

Her hands flitted to the cut that marred her cheek and the bruising around her eye before she settled them in front of her and lifted her chin as if reminding herself that she had nothing to be ashamed of.

I opened my mouth to speak, but my tongue felt swollen and dry. Had she fallen? Was there some sort of accident that I hadn't heard about?

"It's not as bad as it looks, truly. He was angry and he only—"

"He?" I asked, finally able to take a step forward. "He who?"

She looked away and crossed her arms.

"Did someone do this to you?" Suddenly, much of my concern was shunted aside and replaced by boiling anger. "So help me, Rose, if you don't tell me who—"

"It was my own fault. I shouldn't have gotten in the middle—"

"Who?" I demanded. "Who was it?"

"I'm fine." Her voice shook.

"This isn't fine," I said, reaching out and brushing my fingertips over her purple cheek. "When I got the salve, I had no idea how bad it was. What happened?"

She shook her head a little, and I dropped my hand. "Lisette and Edmund were arguing. He was being unreasonable. He grabbed her. He was hurting her, so I tried to make him stop—"

"Lord Rockwell did this?" I couldn't help the sneer that marred my face. Of course it was Rockwell.

She just pressed her lips together, looking strong and stoic but also a bit fragile.

I let out a sigh that turned into a growl as I shoved my hands through my hair. "And what argument was so fraught that he ignored the bounds of human decency and did this to you?"

"We...we went to a dinner party. It was...not pleasant. Edmund scowled and made underhanded comments throughout the whole of dinner, and by the time we got back, his mood was so foul that he took it out on Lisette."

I was utterly confused. "A dinner party?"

She nodded. "With the Suttons."

My mind took an extra moment to absorb this information. "Lord Rockwell had dinner with the Suttons?"

She nodded. "We met Princess Marilee at market yesterday, and she invited us. Edmund didn't seem thrilled with the idea, but we were committed. Lisette offered to go without him, make excuses for him, but that idea seemed to anger him even more."

"Of course it would. Heaven forbid Lord Rockwell's wife be exposed to someone who knows his true nature."

The corners of her mouth pulled down into a deep frown, and she swallowed hard. "What true nature? He was never like this in Winhaven," she said quietly. "He wasn't a saint. I've never really liked him, but I never thought—" She swallowed and didn't go on.

I let out a sigh, doing my best to control the urge to wrap her small frame in my arms and brush her tears from her shining eyes. "This place seems to bring out the worst in Lord Rockwell. It always has, but I've never known him to resort to violence."

She gave a sad little shrug. "I guess I'm just lucky then." She shook her head in frustration. "What happened to him here?" she demanded. "What happened between him and the princess and Sir James? John, you should have seen them. The *hate* between them. The way Princess Marilee *flinched*."

I winced at that. "I don't know it all."

"Tell me what you do know." It was a command.

She probably deserved to know. "Lord Damian Rockwell, Edmund's younger brother, was married to the princess."

"Yes, I know," she said, impatient.

I nodded. "I wasn't here then, but Emeline, Beatrice, and Cecily were. They say the way he treated her was...abominable."

Her brow furrowed. "Like the way Edmund treats Lisette?"

I shook my head. "So much worse than that."

Her countenance dropped.

"He practically kept her prisoner. He wouldn't let her socialize. He controlled what she wore, what she ate. Sometimes he even locked her in her room."

"Oh," she let out in a horrified whisper.

"When he died, Her Highness did not act the part of a grieving widow. And that caused great offense to Damian's family, including Lord Rockwell."

She chewed on her lip a bit and then shook her head. "The anger I saw between them last night seemed more personal than that."

I dipped my head in acknowledgement. "Lord Rockwell came here for a time to try to help Marilee. Sir James, who was Mr. Sutton at the time, was courting her, and because of old childhood rivalries between Sir James and Lord Rockwell, which I do not understand, his time here was not pleasant... for anyone."

I saw tears gather in her eyes. "Is that how it's going to turn out for Lisette? Is Edmund just going to get meaner and meaner until he makes her completely miserable? What kind of a life is that?"

The fact that her concern was entirely for her cousin and not herself was a testament of her selflessness.

She swiped at the tears on her cheeks and tried to shake off her emotion. "If only Lisette and I could stay here while Edmund took himself back to Winhaven."

I didn't know why, but her fiercely whispered wish made my heart swell. "You would want to stay?"

She nodded but kept her gaze on the horizon. "I love it here."

The way the light touched her face made her look so young. I was only eighteen and had assumed that she was of similar age, but looking at her now, I had to wonder if she were younger than I'd assumed. Young and alone. She seemed to have no one but Lady Rockwell. I felt a sudden, overwhelming urge to take care of her, but it didn't feel like I had the right. So I did the next best thing.

"Come on," I urged quietly, gently grasping her elbow. "I want my mother to look at that cut."

Her fingers went self-consciously to her cheek. "Does it look awful?" "It looks painful," I said.

She sniffed and her eyes welled with tears. "It is."

We walked toward the kitchen, and despite my previous determination, I couldn't help looping an arm over her shoulders. When she immediately leaned into my side, I was grateful for my lack of self-control.

"Mum?" I called when we entered the kitchen and I didn't immediately see her.

"Back here," she called.

I followed the sound of her voice to the room off the kitchen that held a small cot, a chair, and various other items. It could be used as a sickroom if any servants fell ill, but it was mostly used by my mother and the other kitchen staff when they weren't actively working on food preparation. My mother sat in the corner, mending one of Gretchen's dresses that she had torn while training. She looked up at me with a smile, but the moment she saw Rose, her smile dropped and she set her work aside.

She came over to Rose and gently framed her face with her hands. "Is your head hurting?"

Rose shrugged. "Only a little."

"Come sit."

Rose did as my mother asked, allowing Mum to fuss over her and make her comfortable. My mother talked and told stories, put more salve on Rose's wound, and showed her Gretchen's torn skirt when Rose asked about it. She even invited Rose to sit in the kitchen with her while she started preparing dinner.

By the time Rose left, she was smiling and calm again. And as the door closed behind her, my mother let out a sigh. "Poor dear." She shook her head, motherly concern written all over her face.

"Why didn't you tell me?" I asked, leaning my hands on the counter.

"Tell you what?" she asked as she cut up potatoes.

"That Lord Rockwell had hit her."

She gave me a grim look. "Not my place to speak ill of his lordship. Our livelihood is dependent on his good opinion."

"Mum—"

"Plus," she interrupted, "I had no idea that you were so interested in the young lady's well-being." Her eyes were piercing as she looked at me. "Since when are you friends with Lady Rockwell's guest?"

I blew out a breath and sank down onto a stool so that I would be at eyelevel with her. "She asked me to teach her how to fight." Her brow furrowed as she scooped up handfuls of cubed potatoes and put them in a pot. "Why would she wish to fight?"

"I think she's in trouble," I admitted and felt my hands start to shake.

"What kind of trouble?"

"I'm not certain," I said, hedging so that I wouldn't break Rose's trust. "But I am worried for her. I think she came here thinking it would be a haven, and now Rockwell is hitting her."

"Lord Rockwell, you mean?"

I ignored her correction. "She needs to be taken care of, not abused."

"But that's not your job, is it?" Her expression was more worried than chiding, but it still made me bristle.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

She let out a sigh. "I am proud to have a son who sees someone in need and does something about it. But I don't want you to confuse compassion with...deeper feelings. You were not meant to care for a highborn woman."

I rolled my eyes. "I'm not falling in love with her, Mum."

"Good," she said stiffly as she wiped her hands on her apron. "Because there is no happy ending if you do."

I stood and bent over the counter to kiss her cheek. "Don't worry, Mum. I'm not such a fool." I left through the back door and returned to the hedges I'd been trimming, ready to take my wrath out on them and worried that I'd just lied to my mother.

Roslyn

The next day, I walked outside, mostly to create as much distance between myself and Edmund as possible. It took me only a few minutes to find John where he was pruning some bushes. When he saw me, he smiled, but it was laced with concern. "Looking for an escape again?" he asked.

I appreciated his attempt at teasing. "I'm just angry, that's all."

"As you should be." He thought for a moment and then set down his sheers. "Come on."

"Where?"

"Sutton, of course," he said and led me into the woods.

"I enjoyed meeting your mother."

"I thought you had already met," he said, sounding curious.

"Well, yes. I had met her as Bridgefield's cook, but not as your mother." He smiled. "I suppose that is different."

"She reminds me of my own mother. She has that same...softness."

"She can be soft, certainly. But she's also fierce when she's protecting Gretchen, whether it's protecting her from someone else or from herself." I smiled. "Gretchen gets herself into scrapes?"

"Constantly." He gave a little shake of his head, but his affection for his sister was still obvious. "She takes after me too much in that way."

"I don't think her taking after you is a bad thing."

He looked away, and for just a moment I thought he might be blushing. "Thank you. But I'd much rather she take after my mother. Mum has a level head."

"I'm certain that's something that will come to Gretchen with time." He blew out a breath. "I certainly hope so."

We reached Sutton Manor, and John entered the kitchen as if it was something he did on a regular basis. I was hit by the same sense of warmth and comfort as I'd found the first time. Though today it was only Emeline and Miriam that were there. Emeline's large pregnant belly in her tiny frame was the first thing I noticed when we walked in. That, and the argument she and Miriam were having.

"Emeline, sit down," Miriam chided in a way that suggested this wasn't the first time she'd told her to do so.

"I can help," Emeline said.

"You're already winded, and I can tell your back is aching. There's no rush, so just let me handle it."

"Ugh," Emeline groaned. "Very well." She crossed to a chair but looked up at us and smiled as she prepared to lower herself into the chair. "Hello, you two, how are things at Bridgefield?"

"Well enough," I said at the same time as John said, "Awful."

Emeline stopped her attempt at sitting and frowned. She straightened to her full diminutive height, her eyes darting between John and me several times before crossing to me and reaching for my chin.

I'd been trying to keep my face turned so that the cut on my cheek wouldn't be on full display, but she'd obviously caught sight of it. She took my chin in her fingers and examined my cheek. "Is this from training?" she asked, her voice tight.

"No," John answered firmly.

She tilted my face so I had to look her in the eye. "What happened?"

I pinched my lips, unsure how to answer. I didn't want to excuse what Edmund had done, but it felt strange to air my grievances to more people.

Before I had decided what to say, John spoke up. "She wouldn't let Edmund hit his wife, so he hit her instead."

Anger flashed swift and strong in her eyes, but she took a controlled breath and spoke calmly. "I see." She cut her eyes over to John. "Your mother tended to it?"

He nodded.

Emeline forced a smile. "Well then. I'm certain it will heal well." She turned away, and instead of going to sit down as she'd been about to do, she went over to the counter and started pounding on a loaf of bread. "I'm so glad that Lord Rockwell has come to bring *peace* to the village."

Oddly enough, her vicious little sneer made me smile, especially when I saw that Miriam looked a bit startled by it.

"Em," John said, getting her attention.

"Hm?" she said, looking up from where she was punishing the dough.

"Will you take care of her?" he asked, tilting his head toward me.

"Of course."

My mouth pulled to the side as I looked at them, confused. "I don't need looking after."

"Just think of it as another good hiding spot." He winked at me. "I have to get back to work."

"Go on, we've got her," Miriam said and waved him off.

And just like that, he was gone. I supposed I shouldn't have been surprised. He had left in the middle of a task, after all.

"How is the training going?" Emeline asked as she formed the dough so that it once again looked like a loaf ready for baking.

"Well enough," I said, and was grateful when Miriam started chattering about her own struggles with learning archery.

I passed a pleasant morning with them, but when they started preparations for the midday meal, I knew I was in the way. Plus, I should return to Bridgefield to eat with Lisette.

I had finished dressing for dinner and was just coming out of my room when a loud knock reverberated through the house. Someone was obviously pounding on the front door.

I hurried down the corridor until I reached the top of the steps and could look down into the entryway. The butler opened the door and I was surprised to see Princess Marilee step inside, followed closely by her guard, Falstone.

"Good evening," she said in a sharp tone. "Is his lordship at home?"

"Yes, Your Highness," the butler replied with a dip of his head. "I will see if he is receiving. Would you like to wait in the sitting room?"

"No thank you, I am fine here."

"Might I take your cloak?" he asked, gesturing to the cloak draped over the aqua-blue gown trimmed in violet lace that she wore underneath.

"No. I won't be staying long."

"Very good, Your Highness." The butler bowed and went to find Lord Rockwell. Princess Marilee immediately started pacing and wringing her hands. Falstone stood against the closest wall, looking appropriately intimidating.

A sound behind me made me turn. Lisette was coming toward me, a hand raised to check that her hair was not coming undone and a concerned look on her face. I shook my head before she could ask any questions and gestured for her to join me against the wall and out of sight. She squeezed in close beside me and looked over my shoulder. "Is that Princess Marilee?" she asked in a whisper.

"Yes, and she has demanded an audience with Edmund."

"Demanded? Oh dear..."

"Your Highness." Edmund's words floated up to us just before he came into sight.

Princess Marilee stopped pacing and pulled her shoulders back as he approached.

"To what do I owe the pleasure?" His voice was a little tight, but not nearly so filled with tension and antagonism as it had been at the dinner party.

Marilee's expression was half rage, half fear. "You and I, we know each other. And while I may not like you, I at least believed that you were more decent than your brother."

Lisette's hand suddenly gripped my arm. I was just as shocked as she was.

Edmund's response was frigid. "My brother was a fine man, and—"

"Don't you dare defend him to me, Edmund!" Her voice was hard, even as it shook. "Don't you do it. Do not tell me he was a fine man when he locked me up and convinced everyone that I was mad. When he gave me *this*." She gestured toward her neck or her shoulder, I wasn't sure which.

"Be careful how you speak to me, Marilee." His voice was a warning. "I am the future ruler of this land."

"What of it?" she challenged, her eyebrows raised. "You have no power over me. Perhaps that's the reason why I am the only one willing to tell you how wrong you are."

"I don't have to listen to this." He turned away from her but stopped when she spoke again.

"You struck her!"

My heart plummeted. Oh, stars. This was about *me*. What could Her Highness possibly be thinking? Provoking Edmund all over something he

had done to me?

Edmund was still turned away from her, but her words had stopped him in his tracks.

"A young woman who should be under your protection and care, and you struck her."

Edmund put one hand on his hip and used the other to pinch the bridge of his nose as he blew out an exhale. Then he slowly turned to face her. "A regrettable mishap. Now if that is all, we are due in the dining room."

"Don't be like Damian." Her voice and her hands trembled. "Please, Edmund. Don't become the sort of husband who brings nothing but misery to his wife. Please. I know you can be better than that."

"You lost the right to have an opinion the moment you slandered my brother's name." He took a step forward, and Falstone did the same.

Marilee held out a staying hand to both of them. "You mean the moment I told the truth?" She raised her brow in question and let her words sink in. "If speaking the truth is slanderous, then perhaps the truth needs to change."

Edmund let out a quiet, humorless chuckle. "You mind your own truth, Princess. And I will mind mine." He walked away without a bow or a farewell.

Princess Marilee stood there, breathing hard for several moments, then turned to the door. Falstone opened it for her, but just before she was about to walk through it, she turned back once more. "And for anyone who happens to be listening at the doors," she said in a raised voice, "anyone who is mistreated will always find refuge at Sutton Manor." Then she departed with the same wild energy with which she'd arrived.

Silence followed the slamming of the door. My breathing and Lisette's filled the air until I said, "Well. That was..."

"Glorious?" she said.

I let out a little chuckle. "Yes, I suppose that word will do." The whole encounter left me befuddled. Princess Marilee barely knew me, and the idea that she would go out of her way to stand up for me felt strange. I didn't deserve it.

After a few minutes, we both went down to the dining room. We were all quiet, even Edmund, and as the meal progressed, I was surprised by how pensive he was. Were Her Highness's words actually making an impact? I hardly dared to hope.

As I went to bed that evening, I couldn't get her words and actions out of my head. She had been so bold. She hadn't shrunk in the face of Edmund's rudeness. She had not run away. Could I be more like that? Did I have the right to be?

After he struck me, and especially after Marilee's brave defense of me, I stopped trying to hide my feelings where Edmund was concerned. If I came upon him in a corridor, I would turn and walk the other way. If I was eating in the morning and he came into the breakfast room, I would abandon my half-eaten plate and leave. At first he looked apologetic. On day three, he started to sigh whenever I walked away. It felt strange to stand up for myself and allow my feelings to be known, especially in front of someone as highborn as Edmund. But I kept at it.

On day five, Lisette and I were in the sitting room, embroidering while she discussed the week's menu with Jeanie, when Edmund walked in.

"Hello, my dear," he said as he bent to kiss Lisette on the cheek.

Lisette gave him a dim smile. He had been more affectionate with her in the past few days, no doubt trying to make up for his abominable behavior, and I had to wonder if it was due to Princess Marilee's words. I could tell Lisette was trying to forgive him but having a difficult time. Honestly, I believed she was more angry on my behalf than her own. Yes, she was frightened of what he might do to her, but she was mortified by what he'd actually done to me. Still, he was her husband. She had to work things out.

As Edmund took his own chair, leaving Lisette and Jeanie to their planning, I reminded myself that I need feel no such compunction to get along with him. I gathered my fabric and threads and tucked them into the basket by my feet, then stood and left the room. I made it halfway down the corridor.

"Really, Rose?"

Edmund's voice made a chill run up my spine, but I held my composure and turned to face him, my brow raised in a question.

He let out another one of his sighs. "Is this really necessary?"

It was a silly question, so I didn't answer. I refused to allow him to convince me that I was the one being irrational.

"I'm sorry for what happened the other night."

The corners of my eyes tightened. For what happened? As if he had as little control over his actions as he did over the weather.

"But this tension between us serves no one, and it's upsetting Lisette." The look of false concern just made me more angry.

I pressed my lips as I took a moment to steady my nerves. "The tension between us? That's what you think Lisette is bothered by? Not the fact that you violently assaulted both her and me?" I trembled but lifted my chin. Saying such things was horribly uncomfortable.

"I told you I was sorry," he said, only a bit defensively.

"And I believe you. But I won't let you pretend that I am the source of Lisette's pain right now. I guarantee I am not."

A sneer flickered across his mouth, but he controlled it quickly. "Are you certain about that?"

"Yes."

"What about this...tryst you've been having with the servant boy?"

Ah. So he would use deflection. "It is not a tryst, and I am not embarrassed by my friendship with John," I said evenly.

"And you think that fact alone isn't upsetting to Lisette?" he asked with a scoff. "She's the future ruler of this land. Do you think she wants the embarrassment of having her relation and closest friend tarnished by a commoner?"

I turned to walk away. I couldn't hear any more of his vitriol without exploding. I didn't care at all that he was insulting me, and the fact that he was insulting John was almost to be expected. But his poisonous words were a condemnation of both my parents, even if he didn't know it.

"Rose, listen to me."

I stopped but didn't turn to look at him.

"As my wife's cousin, I care for you—as a brother. You are of an age when you must start seriously considering looking for a husband. You need someone who will care and provide for you. And if my sister were still living, I would give her the same guidance and caution that I am giving you now."

I sighed. Of course he had to use his dead sister against me. I shook my head, still refusing to turn around.

"Society is not kind to those who show disdain for the culture and traditions that they value. Courting is difficult enough. Don't make it more so by convincing yourself that a momentary flirtation can last beyond that moment." There was a tremor that ran through his voice as he continued. "My sister...she made that mistake, and she died brokenhearted because of it."

I turned to look at him, stunned by the sincerity and grief that clearly marred his face. I wouldn't agree with him, but perhaps his advice didn't come from an entirely pompous place. So I nodded, both in acknowledgement of whatever real pain he was feeling, and also in the hopes that he would let me be.

He nodded in return, seeming grateful for the acknowledgement. "And I'm sorry—for striking you."

The fact that he'd just taken responsibility for his actions made me blink in shock. He gave a little bow and was about to turn away when I blurted out, "Just—"

He looked back at me.

"Don't hurt her," I begged.

He gave a nod and walked on.

I went to my room, brooding all the way. I had liked it better when I could simply dislike Edmund. And I certainly still disliked him. But now I knew he had a dead sister whom he had cared for. And a dead brother as well. He knew loss and held brokenness because of it.

Just like we all did.

But I also had some idea of what his brother was like. It was difficult to believe that anyone, much less a husband, would treat someone so abominably. It was terrifying to think Edmund might be capable of the same cruelty, especially if he was motivated by pain and anger.

Roslyn

A raindrop hit my nose and I looked up at the sky. We'd only been practicing for a few minutes, and I didn't like the idea of the weather interrupting our session. Not just because I wanted to learn more—though I did—but also because...I liked being here. I liked being with John. He saw me in ways that very few people ever had. He taught me because he was kind. He didn't ask for anything in return.

I glanced over at him. He was looking at the clouds as well. "Perhaps it will only sprinkle," he said in a hopeful tone.

"Perhaps," I agreed, but then several more drops hit my face and dress.

He let out a sigh. "Let's head back." He crossed to me, indicating the path back with one arm while the other curved toward my back, not touching it but guiding. Protecting? I set the staff aside and headed toward the path.

As we walked, the rain fell lightly. With the cover of trees, we could hear more than feel it, so we didn't move quickly. It was always like this with John. I always wanted to delay the moment of separation, draw out our time together. Even with the risk of getting soaking wet, I didn't hurry.

"How is your face?" John asked suddenly.

My hand went to the scab on my cheek. "It's well enough," I said, even though it was still tender and a bit swollen.

"Has his lordship done anything else atrocious in the past week, or has he managed to act like a decent human being?"

His indignation made me smile. "I believe Marilee's words might have had an affect on him. He hasn't been violent at all. I think maybe he's even trying to make up for it?"

John's face said he didn't believe it for a moment. "And how is he doing that?"

"He's been more solicitous of Lisette, and he even apologized to me." His brow shot up. "That is something."

"It is. Of course, then he had to go and ruin it by trying to give me a bit of brotherly advice." I rolled my eyes.

His look of disgust was comical. "And what subject does he consider himself an expert in?"

"Courting," I said with a laugh.

His eyes narrowed. "He's giving you advice on courting?"

"Yes, and it would have been amusing if it weren't insulting. I think he got the idea—" The skies opened, and the simple patter of rain became a downpour.

"Run," John prompted, touching the small of my back to nudge me into motion.

We'd been practicing closer to Sutton today, so we hadn't even made it to the stream yet. We'd be completely soaked through by the time we made it back to Bridgefield, but I gathered my skirts and dashed down the path anyway.

The rain pelting my face made it difficult to see, so when John grabbed my elbow and said, "This way," I didn't hesitate to follow where he led.

After several steps, it was clear that we were no longer on a path, but I trusted that John knew where he was going. We were nearly upon the tiny hovel before I even saw it. Wooden walls, a thatched roof and enough room inside for both of us to squeeze in after he pulled the door open. I stepped into the dim interior, grateful to be out of the rain. John closed the door behind us as I tried to wipe the water out of my face.

The door did not fit well in the frame, leaving large gaps around the edges that allowed enough light to filter into the windowless space that we could see one another. John was hunched over, too tall to stand straight, as he shook the water from his hair and hands. "This used to be the gamekeeper's cottage."

"You call this a cottage? It's tiny. Was the gamekeeper an extraordinarily small man?" I asked.

He chuckled. "No, actually. That's why the new one was built years ago."

I looked around for something dry that I could use as toweling, but there was nothing in the space aside from a broken stool and what might once have been a small table. When I looked back to see him glaring up at the

too-low ceiling, I laughed a little. "You might as well sit on the floor. It cannot be comfortable for you to hunch over that way."

He lowered himself to the ground. "The hazards of being too tall," he muttered.

"I don't think you're too tall."

His eyes darted to mine, but I looked away, unsure why my mouth had felt the need to comment. It was true, I admired his height. I found it enticing.

"Are you going to sit?" he asked.

I looked down at my dress and at the dirt floor. "I don't wish to ruin my clothing, and I'm perfectly comfortable standing." My head did not quite touch the ceiling.

He leaned back against one wall and looked up at me. "But then I have to strain my neck if I want to look at you."

"Now you know how the rest of us feel," I teased him.

He chuckled and then sat forward to shrug out of his coat. "Here," he said, laying it on the ground. "My clothing made friends with the dirt long ago."

I conceded and sat down, happy that his coat was large enough to protect all of my skirt from the dirt floor. But once we'd settled in the small space, a chill seeped into my skin. If I'd been dry, I was certain I would have been perfectly comfortable, but my damp skin and my inability to do anything about it left me decidedly cold. I wrapped my arms around myself and pulled my knees up, trying to curl into a ball and keep my warmth in.

"You're cold."

I looked over at John's concerned face and smiled. "Just a little. If it gets worse, I might brave the rain and head back to the house."

"I would offer you my coat, but..." He shrugged.

"I appreciate the place to sit. And with how wet it was, it likely wouldn't have helped to warm me anyway."

I rested my cheek on my knees and looked at him, trying to relax so that I wouldn't start shaking. I enjoyed studying his face in the dim light. His attention was so serious and concerned, and there was a softness in his eyes that made me wish this hovel were just a little smaller.

After several tense and pulsing moments of holding my gaze, he asked, "Would you like me to take you back? There are warm fires inside Bridgefield."

I probably should have said yes. Instead, I moved my head back and forth where it rested on my knees. "I don't want to leave yet."

He swallowed, and the way his throat moved made my stomach tighten. "You don't?"

"I don't."

His gaze intensified and I wondered what he was thinking. "You're shaking," he said quietly. "Stand up."

I pulled my knees in tighter. "No. I told you I don't want to go."

"We're not going to go, but you're cold. Just stand up."

I didn't know what he had in mind, but I trusted him enough to uncurl my body and climb to my feet. He reached for the coat and dragged it closer so that it was situated between his bent knees. Then he reached for my hand. "Come here."

I did my best not to let my sudden nerves affect my breathing as I took his hand, but my body shook even more, and this time I was certain it wasn't from the cold. He tugged me closer and I sat carefully, wondering what came next.

"Lean back against me," he murmured, turning me so that I could lean my back against his chest. I did so, feeling nervous and excited and just a little bit scandalized—but in the best possible way.

I sank back against the broad expanse of his torso and felt his heat seep through the damp back of my dress and warm my skin.

"Is that better?" he asked, a slight crack in his voice.

"Yes, much, but..." I eyed his hands, which were resting on his own knees. "My arms are still cold," I whispered.

His fingers twitched, but soon enough he repositioned his arms so that they covered my own. Oh, sun and stars, I'd never felt anything like it. He was warm and strong, and every bit of me that was in contact with him felt like I was sitting in front of a warm blaze. What need had I for large fireplaces so long as I had John with me? It felt as if I was melting as my muscles relaxed and I sank back against him. "Thank you," I murmured as I let my head fall back.

He sighed a "You're welcome" and rested his chin on top of my head. "Are you comfortable?"

"Very," I assured him, closing my eyes. "And you? Is this comfortable for you?" *Please say yes*.

"Yes. I'm more than content."

"Good." In that case, perhaps we could stay here for a very long time.

He cleared his throat. "So," he said, moving two of his fingers back and forth where they rested against my forearm. "You were telling me about the brotherly advice Lord Rockwell had given you."

I groaned a little. "Yes. Apparently I am old enough that I should be throwing myself out into society in order to lure a husband to my side."

His fingers paused for just a moment before continuing their trek over my wrist. "Does he have a say in that matter?"

"No. Not at all." Thank the stars for that. "My parents entrusted me to Lisette's family, not Edmund's. And no one will have any say in whom I marry except for me and my parents."

"So why is he giving you advice?"

I shrugged. "Probably to get rid of me. I'm a rather inconvenient relation sometimes."

He let out a little guffaw. "If anyone is inconvenient, it's him. So what grand advice did he have?"

"He reminded me of my standing in this world," I said in a mock-serious voice.

"Your standing?"

"As cousin to his wife and a guest in his house. He suggested that I should not be associating with those of a lower class, and that Lisette would hate it if I did."

John stiffened, which was unsurprising. It seemed that anything to do with Lord Rockwell put him in a foul mood, and Edmund's words could certainly be considered an insult to John. I shouldn't have said anything, but he'd asked. Plus, I had thought maybe he would find the situation as ridiculous as I had. I heard him swallow, and he was silent for several moments before finally saying, "He's right, you know."

"No, he's not," I insisted, wondering why he would say such a thing, especially when I was so happily wrapped in his arms.

"I don't like Rockwell, but he knows his way around the rules of society."

I glared at the ground in front of me. "Edmund Rockwell is one of the last people I would ever take advice from."

"That doesn't mean he's wrong."

I hated this conversation. I hated that it had ruined the very lovely time I'd been having, snuggled into his warmth. I pulled away and twisted to

face him. "No," I said boldly, "the fact that he's *wrong* means he's wrong. Do you really think I'd let Edmund Rockwell tell me what to do? Especially after what he did to me?"

Our faces were not far apart, and John studied me for long enough that I fought the urge to squirm. "No," he finally answered. "I imagine you'll do whatever you like."

"Exactly," I said with a nod and then turned back around and leaned against him again, tugging his arms around my shoulders like he was a blanket. I settled against him again and looked up at the large gap in the upper left corner of the door, through which I could see out into the storm. The leaves of the nearby trees dripped with water, and the world beyond that was blurred with rain.

"Rose?" he said, his chest rumbling softly at my back.

"Hm?"

He paused for long enough that I almost said something, but finally he asked, "What am I to you?"

Heat crawled up my neck. "What do you mean?"

"Am I a diversion?" he asked quietly. "Someone you can safely flirt with without any expectations?"

I froze a bit. "No..." This was so new that I hadn't had the time to define it, or my feelings, or my plans for the future, but I knew he wasn't just a diversion.

"Why are you here with me?"

"Because I want to be." Wasn't that obvious?

"To what end?" Frustration seeped into his tone.

I let out a sigh, not knowing how to answer. "Does there have to be an end in mind?" I asked. Of course I wasn't trifling with him, but I didn't know what the future would bring. I didn't know how long I would be here. And more importantly, I didn't know what John wanted from me. With so much uncertainty, I'd just wanted to revel in what I was feeling here and now. "Can't we just...appreciate the moment for what it is?" A moment of shared understanding.

He took a slow breath, like he was trying to be patient but having a hard time.

I didn't understand his frustration with me. Did he expect me to have all the answers? I had no experience with...this sort of thing.

"There are not very many possible endings for us, Rose."

I sat up abruptly and turned to face him. "You think there's no possibility of a future with us?"

"We are bound to come to an end." He gave a little shrug, looking sad. "I think you know that."

The resignation in his eyes made me bristle even more than his words did. "No, I don't agree with that."

"You don't?"

"No," I said, turning fully so that I was on my knees facing him.

He leaned forward just a bit, a challenge in his eyes. "Do you plan to fall in love with me?"

My cheeks heated at the mention of love, and I looked down at my hands, which were clenched together in my lap. "Does anyone plan such things? I thought they just happened." Sometimes I thought I was already half in love with him.

"All right, and if that happens, what then?" "I..."

He took my chin in hand and lifted my face, urging me to look at him. "Will we resign ourselves to aching for one another because there can be no future for us?"

His fingers felt like they were scalding my face and all I wanted to do was lean closer, but his sharp words were cutting at the pleasant feelings his touch gave me. "Why can there be no future for us?" I asked, hurt by the thought.

He dropped my chin abruptly, almost pushing me away. "Don't act naive," he said, his words harsh. "You may be able to trifle with those below you and feel no regret over it—"

"Trifle? I would never—"

"But I don't have the luxury of wasting my time on—"

I pushed away from him and stood, forcing my way out of the hovel. Dealing with the pouring rain was better than allowing him to accuse me of being a heartless noblewoman.

I was drenched in only a few seconds as I walked quickly in the direction of the manor.

"Rose, get back inside," John shouted from behind me.

I turned back. "Why?" I demanded, ignoring the water dripping down my neck.

John stood in the doorway, clearly not eager to join me in the storm. "Because it's raining," he said in exasperation.

"Rain doesn't hurt me," I said. Not the way that he had just hurt me. "And if you have no wish to waste your time on someone like me, then I'll go."

He looked sad and stepped slowly toward me, spots of wetness appearing immediately all over his shirt. "I didn't mean to hurt you."

I backed away, not allowing him to get close to me. "You don't know who I am, or why I'm here."

"You're the daughter of a duke, and you're here because your life is in danger. Do I really need to know more than that?"

His words bruised my heart. "I would hope you would want to know *me*."

He shoved the water out of his eyes, clearly frustrated to be standing in the pelting rain. "I know that a duke's daughter has no business spending time with someone as lowborn as I am." He stood there, a mass of contradictions. So strong and capable, and yet his face was swathed in uncertainty and fear. "I'm a groundskeeper, a cook's son. I have not even the faintest whiff of noble blood in my veins. That is who I am."

"Well, thank you so much for reducing both of us to nothing but the circumstances of our birth," I snapped.

"Of course we're more than that. I know that and you know that, but that doesn't change the fact that you're not going to lower yourself to be with someone like me."

I made a noise of disgust and turned away from him. "That is the most insulting thing that anyone has ever—"

"It's the truth!"

I whirled back to face him, my wet braid whipping around and hitting the opposite shoulder. "Don't tell me what my truth is!"

He stopped in the face of my furious words. "Fine. I won't tell. I'll ask. What possible end can you and I have?" He spread his arms wide, daring me to contradict him.

"Any we want," I answered. "You've showed me as much. You run around learning to be a soldier and fighting against the injustices in Murrwood, even though you claim to be nothing but a groundskeeper."

"That's not the same," he insisted.

"If the relationship is strong enough, it can work."

"How?" he pressed with a scoff.

"The same way my parents did it," I yelled at him.

I could tell I'd caught him by surprise.

"Why do you suppose that the Saldian nobility object to the idea of *me* inheriting the throne? It's because my mother was not nobility." I lifted my hands and let them fall down again, slapping against my sides as the wind and rain lashed at my clothing. "It's bad enough that the king might not be able to produce an heir healthy enough to succeed him. The crown going to someone outside his direct line is bad enough, but having it go to me? To a gutterling? Such contamination to the throne is unacceptable. And so I am here." I spread my arms wide, gesturing to this lovely place that was not my home. "Hiding from the countrymen who wish me dead for no other reason than that my parentage doesn't meet their high standards." The last words came out almost like a growl as all the bitterness and anger I felt toward those trying to do me harm rose up. I was so tired of hiding. I hated being away from my home. I missed my parents desperately.

"Gads, Rose," he said as he approached, no longer seeming to care about the rain. "I'm sorry." I could see that he meant it, but there was more than just concern on his face; he also looked shocked. "That's awful and inexcusable, and I wish that's not how things were."

I stiffly nodded my thanks.

"Please, Rose," he said, walking toward me with his hand outstretched. "Please come back inside."

I only hesitated for a moment before stepping forward to take his hand. He immediately draped his arms about my shoulders and propelled me back to the shack and out of the rain.

Once inside, he shut the door and I stood with my clothes dripping in the small space. I wiped the water from my face as I noticed how heavy my dress was. Luckily it was a bit warmer inside this tiny hut, but my discomfort was now caused by the tension between us. He'd hurt my feelings, and I'd lashed out at him.

When I looked up, it was to find him staring down at me, his eyes heated and his muscles coiled even as he hunched under the low roof. Finally, he took a deep breath and then bent to retrieve his coat from the ground. We'd both abandoned it there, which meant that it was still a bit dry, so he shook it off and came close enough that he could wrap it around my shoulders. I

stared at his face as he tugged it closed over my dress and then ran his hands down my arms.

His eyes found mine, and I swallowed.

"I do want to know you," he said. "But I didn't realize that..." He shook his head and the questions written on his face tightened all his features.

"What?" I prompted.

He ran a hand through his soaking hair. "I knew you were the daughter of a duke, but...you are in the royal line of succession?"

My heart dropped. I hadn't thought through what it would mean to him if I confessed all of that. But what was done was done, so all I could do was answer honestly. "Yes."

He gave a slow nod, letting his hands drop from my arms as he took a step back. He looked behind him and decided to try sitting on the rickety table. It managed to hold his weight and he looked at me, our eyes nearly level. "And the people who wish you dead—it's because you might someday be *queen* of Saldine?"

I gave a shrug. "Saldian nobility values pure blood. Nobles fraternizing with the lower class isn't just looked down on, it's an *offense* to them."

"Isn't that the way it is in every kingdom?"

"To an extent, yes, but just look at Princess Marilee and Sir James," I said, gesturing over my shoulder in the direction of Sutton Manor. "She married a man who was only a gentleman. No title. And while some look down on that, I don't get the impression they are hated or rejected for it. Even Edmund, as pompous as he is, and as much as he seems to dislike James—it's for personal reasons. Edmund dislikes James as a person. He doesn't hate him just because he's a gentleman who married a princess."

John let a sardonic grin spread across his face. "I suppose you're right."

"My father fell in love with a servant, not someone just a step below him. Not a gentleman's daughter, but a common servant. And in my kingdom, that's not just odd, it's unacceptable. Especially when that union produced *me*." I pinched my lips and shrugged, hating that this was the truth of my life. "I am a blight on the face of nobility."

"You are not a blight," he said, as though offended on my behalf.

"I am to them. There is one crown prince in ill health, and after that, the crown would fall to me. My father is the king's oldest cousin. The king has no siblings, so I am the next in line."

He blinked for a moment, giving a little shake of his head as he tried to make my words make sense. "What of your father? Would he not inherit before you?"

"No, he will not be permitted to inherit. And can you guess why?"

He seemed hesitant to answer, but I waited, knowing he knew the truth.

Finally, he said, "Your mother?"

"Yes. They could not possibly allow a woman born so low to become queen. It is unlawful. But me? I have just enough royal blood that I would not be prevented. At least not by the law. And it's that same wretched law that has put me in this position—that put my life in danger."

"If they had cut your father's family out of the line of succession altogether..."

I lifted my hands to my sides. "Then I would not be in this mess. I would have been happily forgotten and allowed to grow up in the halls of my parents' home."

He let out a long sigh and reached his hand out. I took it and he pulled me close enough that he could enfold me in his arms. "I'm sorry."

I just nodded and sniffed down my frustration, but the longer I stood there, soaking in his warmth and calm, the less frustrated I became. "Of course," I murmured into his chest, "if I were not in this mess, then I would not be here. And I am glad to be here."

He didn't respond right away. In fact, he did not respond at all, and I started to worry that I had embarrassed both of us. Yet he kept his arms around me, holding me and all my secrets against his broad chest, one hand between my shoulder blades and the other resting on the back of my head. So I contented myself with staying there in that dirty hovel, feeling more safe than I had at any time in the last four years.

Roslyn

Being in that hovel with John, I'd finally believed that we were starting to understand one another. He'd wrapped me up and made me believe that he valued our friendship enough not to care about my rank and all that it meant.

But then he'd gone cold. Perhaps not cold, but cool, polite—infuriatingly polite.

My disappointment over his withdrawal was profound. For a fleeting few weeks, I'd started to feel like I was fitting in somewhere, like perhaps I could belong with John. But it had been nearly three weeks since our fight in the rain and he was still pushing me away. Three weeks of worrying what it meant and being unable to confide in anyone about it. I wanted to tell Lisette, but I was terrified that she would disapprove, and if Lisette disapproved...I didn't know if I'd be able to handle that.

He continued to teach me, and my confusion over the way he was acting drove me to focus and try harder. When sparring with a staff, I was more willing to attack. My hurt made me more willing to push back because it was my only outlet.

So much so that when he took me back to the stables during another training session and asked me to try flipping him over my back, I was ready for it. I would likely fail, but I wouldn't let that stop me.

"Now, remember," he said, and reminded me of the different steps, speaking clearly in a way that felt instructive but completely impersonal.

I stood with my arms crossed, feeling hurt and defiant.

"Are you ready?" he asked.

I moved into position and raised my chin. "Yes."

He came toward me, and I could tell that he fully expected me to dodge to the side, shy away, or freeze. Instead I grabbed his arm and gave it my all.

And failed.

He was too tall, or too heavy. Or maybe I just hadn't done it right. Either way, I ended up falling to my knees and then growling in frustration.

"That was a good first attempt," he assured me. "But with someone as big as me, you'll want to try to grab higher on my arm, otherwise you won't be able to pull me forward far enough. Try grabbing my elbow instead of my wrist."

I tried it again, but the movement wasn't fluid. I was too caught up in the details of the maneuver and ended up flustered, especially when each failed attempt ended with his chest pressed against my back and his voice in my ear.

Couldn't he feel that? The warmth that was almost a fire between us? Did it not affect him at all?

Perhaps that one flirtatious moment in the hovel had been enough for him, and now he was done with me. I shook my head at the thought. No matter how hurt I was by John's suddenly polite treatment, I knew he wasn't heartless.

I tried a fourth time to flip him and nearly succeeded, but it left me panting and frustrated.

"That was good. You've almost got it," he encouraged.

"No I don't," I insisted. "Let's move on to something else." This failure to win against him felt too symbolic of my failure to be wanted by him.

"You can do this, Rose. You did it with Gretchen."

"It's not the same."

"It is."

I waved away his words, unwilling to be pulled into an argument. "We will just have to hope none of my opponents are as large as you."

He pressed his lips and I could tell that he wanted to push me, but my look of defiance seemed to stop him. "Are you certain?"

"Absolutely." If he was going to act like there wasn't something warm and wanting between us, then I could do the same. I looked away. "Though I suppose I wouldn't mind trying it without the pile of hay," I muttered.

I almost agreed to it. If she'd be willing to keep trying by flipping me onto hard ground, it was almost worth it.

Her anger was justified. The words I'd said to her out in the rain were unfair. I'd accused her of terrible things. I'd suggested she was using me and insinuated that her feelings couldn't be real. Yes, I'd done it out of fear. I'd been trying to protect myself because my life had taught me that beautiful young women of the noble class did not look at men like me, and my mother had reminded me of the same only a few days before our fight. So when she'd wrapped herself in my arms and suggested there was a possibility of more than just friendship, I hadn't believed her. Rose could have anyone. Any man in his right mind would want her, especially if they were Saldian nobility. Marrying her would mean a potential *throne*. Yet, she said they wanted her dead. Granted, I was certain it wasn't all of them. In fact, it was probably only an idiotic few, so drunk on power and pride that they were willing to destroy a young woman in the hopes of climbing a little higher. But those few had crippled her. She had no idea whom she could trust.

So she'd decided to trust me.

And I'd ruined it.

After those glorious moments in the old hovel—moments that still made my neck hot when I thought about them—I had pulled away. I'd escorted her the rest of the way back to the house and let her go inside without saying the things I felt. I should have told her that I was grateful she was here and that she was the best part of my day. I should have confessed to enjoying my training with her more than I'd enjoyed it with all the lads I'd been sparring with for years.

But I hadn't said any of that. I'd bid her a polite farewell and watched as she went inside.

I told myself I was doing what was best for both of us. Despite what she believed, despite how she'd been brought up, I knew that a romantic connection between us could only bring her pain, and I refused to drag her down.

And yes, I could admit that I was also protecting myself. Because falling hopelessly in love with a woman who really could not marry someone like me would be idiotic.

I'd pushed her away, so I couldn't blame her for maintaining her distance when I was the one who had ruined our closeness.

But I missed her. Even as she stood in front of me and we continued our lessons, I missed her. She was focused and determined, making more progress than she had before. But she was also sad, and I hated seeing her sad.

I seriously considered agreeing to her spiteful little suggestion, but decided against it. If she ended up actually hurting me, it would likely undo much of the progress we'd made lately.

"Let's move on to tripping," I suggested.

She just nodded.

"So if someone grabs you like this," I said as I took hold of her upper arms, "I want you to step toward them."

"Not pull away?"

I shook my head. "If it's someone stronger than you, you have a much better chance of breaking their hold if you attack."

"I hate attacking," she muttered under her breath.

"You've seemed to be doing much better at it the last couple weeks," I said, stretching my back a little to tease her.

Instead she looked away, almost like she felt bad about it. "I suppose."

I wanted to reassure her. Even more than that, I wanted to wrap her in my arms, but that wasn't an option. "Look." I switched our positions so she had her back to the pile of straw. "Grab my arms."

She did so, though her hands didn't really fit around my upper arms, so she mostly just clung to the fabric of my shirt. I smiled but smothered it quickly. She didn't need me fawning over her. She needed my instruction.

"Now, if you have a hold of my arms there, then I would bring my arms up between us and step forward so that my knee is behind your knee." I hooked my knee behind hers from the outside. Stars, she was so close that we were practically embracing. I swallowed. "Then all I have to do is push on your shoulders..." I did so, but instead of letting go of my arms and using her hands to break her fall like anyone else would have, she tightened her grip and tried to keep herself up by holding on to me.

I fell down with her.

Not that I really needed to, but it would have been rude to push her off of me the way I would have done with a real opponent. I ended up on my knees beside her with my upper body hovering over hers and our feet tangled.

If Lord Edmund were to walk in right now...

I stared down at her, wanting nothing more than to slide my hands around her tiny waist and press my face into the crook of her neck. Instead I froze, looking down at her and watching her breathe quickly. I didn't want to pull away, but I couldn't in good conscience get closer, so I hovered and waited for her to move.

When she did, it was a simple, small gesture. She released the grip on my shirt and slid her hand up my shoulder.

I jumped up, quickly and dramatically brushing the straw from my clothing, before reaching down and hauling her none-too-gently to her feet. "Good. Now you try." I ignored the moment we had just had. If I didn't, I would ruin everything. Our friendship, her reputation.

She took several angry swipes at her skirts before positioning herself in front of me, a challenge in her eyes.

When I went to grab her arms, she moved quickly, hooked her leg behind mine and shoved me hard.

Well. At least she was learning.

Roslyn

There had been those few minutes in the stable when he'd seemed like the warm and kind John of before, but as soon as I'd started to respond to that warmth, it had all gone away. It felt like a slap to the face, more painful than the blow delivered by Edmund.

So after yet another day of polite distance, I went out, and instead of staying on the Bridgefield grounds where John would be working, I took the path that led to Sutton Manor. It had been more than two months since John had introduced me to Emeline, Beatrice, and Cecily, and I was ashamed to say I'd never gone back on my own. I had wanted to, but I'd always talked myself out of going, convinced that it would be an imposition.

I had expected to have to knock on the kitchen door and hope to find Emeline or Cecily there. Instead I found them both outside, walking past the vegetable garden and toward the kitchen. Emeline had a tiny baby bound to her chest, and Cecily was child-free for the moment.

When they saw me coming, both waved and turned in my direction.

"You've finally returned to see us," Cecily said. "We thought we had scared you off."

"Not at all, I just didn't want to intrude." I tried to smile brightly back.

"No intrusion at all," Emeline said as she bounced in place.

I smiled as I looked at the sleeping infant. "Boy or girl?"

"Boy."

"He's beautiful. I didn't expect to see you both out here. Where are you coming from?"

"My home," Cecily answered. "My husband and I live in a cottage at the edge of the woods." She gestured off to her left. "Are you training with John?"

"No, I actually came to say hello to you all and perhaps get one of Emeline's excellent pastries, but—" I gestured toward the baby, not sure if it would be insulting to insinuate that she might not be baking as much now that she had an infant.

Emeline just laughed. "Don't worry, Miriam is helping me to keep up with the cooking."

"Yes, of course."

"Well, come along," Cecily said, leading the way. "She's likely finishing up a batch of bread about now."

I gratefully fell into step beside them as we headed toward the kitchen.

"Do you like training any better?" Cecily asked. "I know you weren't all that fond of it when you started."

"It's fine," I answered.

Emeline chuckled. "That means no."

Cecily pulled the door open and gestured for Emeline and me to go in. I stepped inside, enjoying the warmth that wrapped around me. Miriam was removing a loaf of bread from its pan. She looked up and smiled but did a double take when she saw me.

"Hello, Miss Rose." She bobbed a curtsey.

"Hello, Miriam."

"Did you know that Miriam is my husband's sister, as well as a marvel in the kitchen?" Emeline asked as she leaned over to inhale the bread's fragrance.

Miriam rolled her eyes. "I'm competent, but Emeline has all the talent." She looked over at me. "You're Lady Rockwell's cousin, are you not?"

"Yes, though I've lived with her long enough that she feels more like a sister. Or, at least what I imagine a sister would feel like."

"Choosing your family can be a wonderful gift," Cecily said. "That's what most of us have done."

"Really?" I asked, sitting at the table with her. "Tell me."

They were kind enough to oblige, and I sat in wonder as Emeline and Cecily told me how they'd each lost their families, and then explained the story of their time at Bridgefield and how they'd come to know Princess Marilee. They'd supported the princess when her husband had mistreated her. They'd stood by her and helped her rebuild her life once he was dead. After what John had told me, it was fascinating to hear the perspective of these women. They had been there to take care of her, and the princess had treated them like family ever since.

Miriam shared her history as well. She and her brother had run from a life of thievery, and she'd found her place among the staff here. I was envious by the end of it, both of their closeness with one another and their obvious respect and affection for Sir James and Princess Marilee. I had the sense that the comfort I found here wasn't confined to the kitchen. It was simply the way this house was.

Several hours passed before I convinced myself to leave the women to their work and return to Bridgefield, walking through the woods as usual.

When I reached the back of the manor, I crossed the veranda and entered the house, still feeling like I was wrapped in the comfort of the Sutton kitchen. I never would have expected to find such a sense of belonging among strangers, yet part of me wasn't surprised. My mother would have fit perfectly among them. She had been one of them. No wonder they felt so familiar.

When the time for dinner rolled around, I found myself less angry with Edmund. Perhaps that was some of the goodwill from the Sutton women rubbing off on me, but I could also admit that he'd been trying lately. Ever since he'd slapped me, his behavior toward Lisette had improved. I wanted to believe it would last.

Dinner went off without any explosive arguments or snide remarks, so I counted it a success.

Before going up to my room, I stopped in the library to find a book. I lingered for quite some time, reading the beginning of several books because I was unable to settle on one. I had just started yet another book when an uncomfortable feeling settled between my shoulders.

I turned to find one of Edmund's guards standing just inside the door, his gaze fixed on my feet and then slowly making its way up my body until it landed on my face. Then one side of his mouth curled up. "Miss Rose," he said.

Flashes of alarm were pulsing through me. Everything about him screamed danger, leaving me frozen in place. I just stared.

Then he took a step forward and I unfroze. I turned to face him, raising my chin even as I clutched the book to my chest like a shield. "Did you need something?"

He paused, likely because of my chilly tone. Then he rubbed one thumb over his bottom lip as he thought for several moments. "I just wondered if you'd like some company."

His eyes raked over me again, making my muscles clench tighter. I didn't understand exactly what he was suggesting, but it made my insides writhe with discomfort. "Company? Why would I need company?" I lifted a haughty brow and tried to make it sound as ridiculous as possible, somehow knowing that anything resembling even a morsel of encouragement would be detrimental.

He paused yet again, and I wanted to crawl out of my skin. I wanted very much to feel like I was in control of this situation, but I did not. Not at all.

"I've uh...seen the company you keep."

"The company I—" My voice choked off as his insinuations suddenly made horrible sense. He'd seen me with John. Going off into the woods. Going into the stables. Disappearing without any sort of proper escort. Despite the terror ripping through me as he stood there looking very powerful and horribly hungry, I made my voice hard as I responded with narrowed eyes. "I assure you that any company I keep is entirely professional, and I welcome no other offers of *company*. And if any such offers ever come from you again, I would be obliged to inform my cousin that one of her husband's trusted guards is not to be trusted at all. Have I made myself clear?" The last question rang with strength and finality. So much so that the guard looked unsure and backed up several steps.

A small flash of anger lit his eyes, but then he bowed. "I meant nothing by it, miss. Forgive me for speaking poorly." He bent low and left the room.

I stood there, stiff and trembling for several interminable moments before I let out a heaving breath and doubled over, having to catch myself on the back of a nearby chair so I wouldn't fall to my knees. I hadn't realized I'd

had it in me. The past several years had been dedicated to blending into the background, but when I had needed it, all of my noble training had come rearing back and I'd made myself heard. Oh how grateful I was for it.

John

I laughed at Gretchen's antics, content to sit in the warmth of the fire crackling in the corner. Mum had finished repairing Gretchen's skirt, and instead of putting it on the normal way, Gretchen had draped it over her head and was walking around as if she had long, luxurious hair. We often spent our evenings here in the room just off the kitchen. Whether we were finishing work or just able to take an hour to relax, it had become our gathering place.

When the knock sounded on the kitchen door, it startled me. The three of us looked at one another for a moment. If a servant needed something, they would have just walked in. The kitchen wasn't off-limits to anyone. Who would knock?

Another knock sounded, and I got to my feet. I went into the kitchen and crossed to the door on the other side, opening it. Rose stood there, her face glowing ghostly white in the light of the lantern that she held. "Rose," I said, and pulled the door wider.

Her lip trembled and she swallowed. "I didn't have anywhere else to go." And then her face crumpled and she started to cry.

I thought about pulling her into the kitchen and having her join my mother and Gretchen, but I selfishly joined her in the hall instead, closing the door behind us and immediately pulling her into my arms. "What happened?" I asked, taking the lantern from her and setting it on the ground.

She tried to talk several times, but her sobs kept getting in the way. I wanted to offer her a seat, but there were none in the hallway, so I pulled open the door to my right that led to Bridgefield's stillroom.

I brought the lamp in with us and turned up the wick so it burned brighter. I guided Rose over to the one sturdy chair that sat in the corner and encouraged her to sit down. She immediately buried her face in her hands, making it so that I could see nothing but the top of her head, so I dropped to my knees in front of her. "Hey," I said, trying to pull her hands away from her face. "Tell me what's wrong. Are you hurt?" If Rockwell had hurt her again...

She shook her head as she continued to try to rein in her crying, swiping at the tears on her cheeks with frustration.

Good, she wasn't hurt. I furrowed my brow as I looked at her. Not *physically* hurt, anyway.

She looked me in the eye, and for a moment I thought she was going to bury her face back in her hands. Instead, she leaned forward and buried it in my shoulder, threading her arms under mine and around my back.

I didn't hesitate to put my arms around her, and I was content to let her cry for several minutes more. Once she had quieted, I didn't break the silence, choosing instead to wait on her.

She turned her head a little so that her forehead rested against my neck, and when she spoke, her breath brushed across my collarbone.

"One of Edmund's guards found me in the library," she said in a very small voice.

I waited a moment, wondering and worried about where this story was going, but she didn't continue, so I just said, "All right?" in the hopes that it would prompt her to continue.

"He...offered me"—she sucked in a little gasp that told me she was on the verge of crying again—"his company." And then she did dissolve into tears, the weight of her head pressing into the crook of my neck.

It took me several moments of shocked silence to convince myself that I had understood both her words and what they meant. Surely, one of the guards wouldn't...and yet, her profound distress told me that yes, that was exactly what had happened. I forced several steadying breaths in and out of my lungs before I asked, in the calmest voice I could muster, "When you said no"—because I had no doubt she had said no—"did he accept that answer?"

One of her shoulders lifted and my heart dropped into my stomach. "Pretty much," she said, letting out a shuddering sigh as she still fought her tears. "I had to get very high and mighty, be very blunt, and then threaten his job, but he left after that."

A sigh whooshed from my lungs, knowing that if a guard had been bold enough to even suggest such a thing, it could have been so much worse. "I can hardly believe it. Why would he—"

"He's seen us," she said, pulling back so that I could see her face. "When we"—she dropped her eyes—"are training. He's seen us go into the forest together, so he thought—"

I shot to my feet and she stopped talking. I was horrified. This had happened because of me? I turned my back to her, but there was nowhere to go in this small space. "Saints, I am such a fool."

"No, you're not," she said from behind me.

I spun to face her. "Oh, yes I am. I know better than this. I thought...I don't know what I thought. Maybe I wasn't thinking at all. If I'd been thinking, then I wouldn't have been so careless with your reputation."

Suddenly she sprang to her feet and stepped up to me, one slim finger poking into my chest. "I knew what I was doing! I'm not an idiot. I knew it was a risk, and I was willing to take it. I thought that since we weren't... doing anything wrong that there was no harm. And there wasn't!"

I was speechless, fascinated by this version of Rose, the version that took control and wasn't afraid to tell me I was wrong.

"I haven't done anything to ruin my reputation," she proclaimed, fitting her hands on her hips and looking defiant. "And if that guard didn't already have a black heart, then it wouldn't even be an issue." Her defiant mask slipped and she looked away, hugging herself. "But I should have known better. I was just so grateful to be in a place where my every move wasn't watched by critical nobles and curious servants. I was careless."

"We'll just..." I said, trying to think of a solution that might help her to move forward. "We'll be more cautious in the future. If we speak where people can see us, we'll be polite. And when we need to practice, we'll always meet there and never go together."

She stared at the floor but nodded her head eventually. "Yes, that's a good idea." She sniffed. "I can pretend like I'm the sort of person who would never lower myself to befriend someone of a station beneath me."

It felt like a punch to my stomach, having my own words thrown back at me, the words I'd used just three weeks ago. "I'm sorry I said those things." She shrugged but didn't look up. "It's how you felt."

"That doesn't mean I was right. It was an unfair assumption. It was just my own...insecurity, and I'm sorry. I've just...never been around someone like you."

She looked up at me and her eyes looked tired. "Yes, that's the trouble. No one will let me fit in anywhere. And sometimes it feels like no one wants me to fit in anywhere."

"I want you to fit," I said, knowing with everything inside me that it was true.

"Do you?" she asked, and the uncertainty in her voice broke my heart. "Yes."

"Where?" she challenged. "Where do you want me to fit? You want me to fit in this household, where guards ask for favors, and the lord of the manor raises his hand to me? Or with the Winberg nobility who gawk? Or maybe with the Saldian society who wish me dead?"

I reached out and tugged her toward me until she was fully enveloped in my arms. I pressed her to my chest and rested my chin on top of her head. "Here. I want you to fit here."

She clung to me and I held her for a long time, wanting her to know that if she needed someone to hold on to, I would always be willing. As we stood in the stillness of that room, I wondered how it was that so many people had managed to make her feel like nobody. The daughter of a duke, and possibly the future queen of Saldine, and instead of being able to grow and thrive, she was forced to hide and survive.

When she finally pulled back, I looked down into her face, raising a hand to push a lock of hair from her forehead. The way she looked up at me with such trust and vulnerability made me swallow. Oh how I hoped I didn't end up letting her down.

Her lips were soft and slightly parted, and for a moment I let myself wonder what it would feel like to kiss her. I'd kissed a number of girls and I'd always found it fun and enjoyable, but the idea of kissing Rose...it wouldn't be just a kiss. If I ever kissed Rose, it would be because it meant something, and I wasn't sure I was ready to walk down that road. Instead, I cleared my throat and asked, "Are you going to be all right?"

She searched my eyes for several moments, her lips twisted off to one side before she slowly nodded and loosened her hold on me.

"Good," I said, allowing myself to step back. "I would offer to walk you upstairs, but..."

She gave a cynical chuckle. "We can't give the guards more to gossip over."

"I care about you too much to cause problems for you."

At my words, a genuine smile tugged on her lips. It was small, but having earned it buoyed me up. She reached up and brushed her fingers along my jaw and I nearly stopped breathing. "Thank you, John."

I grabbed her hand and brought it to my mouth so I could kiss her palm. "Good night."

Roslyn,

You can come home, my darling! The day has come. The king and queen welcomed a healthy baby boy last month. There will be a celebration in three weeks, and you surely must come for it! The news from the palace is that not only is this baby boy hardy and healthy, but Prince Marcos's health has been improving of late. There may very well be two healthy heirs for the kingdom to rely on, and there should be no further reason for your presence to be a threat to anyone.

Come home, darling! Come as soon as you can! Anxiously awaiting your return, Mother

The letter trembled in my hand as thoughts and feelings tumbled inside me. I'd wanted to return home for so long, but now that I was faced with the real prospect, the excitement I should have felt was buried. Instead, I was mostly worried.

I dug my thumb into the front of my shoulder as a sharp pain made me wince. It was that same old story. The fear and resentment that I had never been able to get rid of. The ache that told me no one wanted me, and no one ever would.

There were other layers to the pain. It wasn't just the apprehension and feeling of nothingness. It was also sadness at having to leave this place, because this place made me feel like someone. I felt wanted here.

Going home meant being reunited with my parents, but it also meant leaving Lisette, leaving the women of Sutton Manor.

Leaving John.

Before

Roslyn, Ten years old

I was alone. Again.

All day, I'd tried to join the other children just like my parents had told me to, but every time I got close, Neil and Everett would say, "Ew, it smells like gutterling!" and then run away.

I really did try to be brave and strong. I tried to believe that what my parents said was true. But it had been years. Neil and Everett still hated me, and the other children always followed their lead.

So when the sun started to set and Nina came up to me, I didn't know what to think. I just stood there, nervously tugging on my embroidered bodice, hoping she would think my dress was pretty.

"Well," she said. "Are you going to hide with us?" she asked with wide eyes.

My heart pounded and then soared. She was asking me to play? "Yes," I readily agreed. "I'll hide. I'm good at hiding."

"Come on, then. We're all going to hide in the gardens."

I walked alongside her, thrilled when she looked over and smiled at me. Maybe she didn't agree with her brother. Maybe she would tell the others that I wasn't so bad. I smiled shyly, excited to be part of their game.

"You hide over there," she said, pointing down one path. "I'll hide over here. And remember, we don't want the seekers to win, so don't come out no matter what."

I readily agreed and ran off to find a good spot. I wanted to do well. Maybe if I was the best hider, they'd want to play with me again.

The spot I found was a good one and I was proud of myself. No one found me.

In fact, no one even came close. I waited, and I waited. The sun set. It got colder. But no one ever even walked by. My body started to feel cramped, and my knees hurt where they pressed into the rocky ground.

But no one came.

I was alone and unwanted. Again.

John

The sound of a door opening caught my attention as I worked to trim the vines that had been trained to grow in an arch over the stone bench that sat beneath them. I looked through the leaves to see who had come outside, and a grin curved my mouth when I saw Rose crossing the terrace. Was she

looking for me? I hoped so. My mind had been so full of her since yesterday that Tyson had taken to throwing things at me when I got lost in thought.

I dusted off my hands, wondering if she'd be able to see me or if these plants were thick enough to hide my bulky form. But she didn't look up to search the grounds, so maybe she wasn't looking for me. She looked distracted and lost in thought. She dug her thumb into the palm of her hand the way she always did when she was anxious, even though that hand also held a letter.

I wanted to call out and ask if all was well, but I was too worried that someone might see us. Luckily she meandered down the stairs, her feet taking the familiar path into the gardens I was tending even while she seemed preoccupied with whatever was troubling her.

Since she was heading in my direction, I waited until she was close enough that I didn't have to raise my voice for her to hear me. "Something is on your mind."

She looked over at me, startled. "What?"

I smiled, since she'd just proved my point. "I said, something is on your mind."

"Oh." She looked down at the paper, then looked back at me, her bright eyes concerned and her brow furrowed. "Yes."

"Will you tell me what?" I asked, dusting off the knees of my trousers as she neared.

She held up the paper she'd been reading. "It's a letter."

"Who is it from?"

"My parents."

I knew she received regular letters from her mother, but they didn't usually cause her distress. "And what do your parents have to say?"

She took a deep breath. "The King and Queen of Saldine have just welcomed a new child. My parents, they say...they say it's time for me to return home." Her voice trailed off into such quiet tones that I barely heard the last few words. But I was confused by her obvious melancholy. She'd been wanting this, preparing for it the entire time I'd known her. Yet she looked as though the news were dreadful.

A healthy heir to the throne meant she was less of a threat and should be safer. "That is good news, is it not?" I gestured toward a nearby bench. It

was surrounded by tall bushes that would hide us from view if anyone looked down from the house.

"Yes. Yes, of course." She sat on the bench. "I just...I've been hoping for this for so many years—I'm not sure I really believe it's true."

"That's understandable."

"And there's also..."

"What?" I sank down beside her.

"I like it here. I'll miss..." She turned to me, her mouth trying to form words that wouldn't come out for several moments before she dropped her gaze in frustration. "I've enjoyed training. With you."

My throat felt swollen. Was she saying she would miss *me*? I swallowed down my nerves and dug deep for some courage. "I'll be sad to see you go," I admitted.

She looked back up at me, like my confession was a relief to her. Then she pressed her lips and shook her head as her eyes became glossy with tears. "I don't want to leave you."

The surge of feeling that reared inside me at her words was nearly overwhelming. I wrapped an arm around her, wanting to do more but remembering that this moment of distress was about her, not me. "I will miss you, Rose."

She clung to me for a moment and I realized she was trembling. Concern tightened my chest. "What else is wrong?"

She took a deep breath and then pulled back. "My parents think that it will be safe, but what if..." Her voice trailed off again, and she swallowed.

Yes. What if? "You'll have protection, won't you?"

"Yes. My parents have a contingent of soldiers in their employ."

"And for the journey?" She needed protection while traveling as well.

"I don't know."

Her lack of surety made my gut twist. "Surely Lord Rockwell will not send you without protection."

"I'm certain everything will be fine."

My brow furrowed. Her weak reassurance was not enough. Plus, her obvious nerves served only to increase my own. "When must you go?"

"I don't know. She wants me to come as soon as possible. I haven't spoken to Lisette yet, but...maybe a week?"

"You're nervous." It wasn't a question.

She rubbed her hands on the fabric that covered her thighs. "I don't know what to expect. I'm excited, but I'm terrified. And I can't help thinking that terror is the more apt emotion." She leaned her shoulder into mine, no doubt seeking comfort. I wished I could give it more fully.

"There are many unknowns," I said, not liking how true it was.

"Too many."

"But you get to go home," I reminded her.

She sat up straight and turned to look at me fully as a smile stretched her mouth. "Yes. I do."

"And I'm certain we could work out some of the unknowns. Go share the news with Lady Rockwell. See what arrangements can be made for your protection. Perhaps she will even accompany you." I hoped that was the case. If Lisette went, then I knew Lord Rockwell would send a worthy pair of guards with them. That would be for the best.

Roslyn

I did as John had suggested and hurried to find Lisette.

"That's wonderful," she said after hearing the news, but then her face fell. "But are you sure that is wise?"

I shrugged. "I have to trust that my parents know what they are doing. They are the ones who are in Saldian society day in and day out." I said it to reassure myself as much as her. "It's easy for me to remember nothing but the threat while I'm here. I'm certain my fears have only compounded over the years."

"Well," she said, putting on a bright smile. "What do we need to do to prepare you?" She suddenly put a hand to her mouth. "I can't believe I'll be losing you, Rosie," she said with unshed tears in her eyes.

"Oh, Lisette." I went to hug her. "You're going to make me cry, and I'm certain I'll do plenty of that without your help."

"You're right. You're right." She pulled back and sniffed down her emotions. "What do we need to do?"

I told her about my need for protection, and she agreed with me fully. After talking it over, we decided to bring up the news of my departure as well as a request for an escort at dinner.

"Edmund," Lisette began during a lull in our dinner conversation. "Did you hear the good news?"

"What news?"

"Rose's parents have sent for her. She is to return home!"

Edmund looked genuinely delighted by the news. "Well, I am very happy for you, Rose. I'm certain you are anxious to return to your parents."

"Thank you," I said.

"When do you go?"

"In a week, my lord."

"Well, I wish you safe travels. You can of course take one of the carriages." He returned his attention to his plate.

"Darling," Lisette continued, "I was thinking it might be a good idea for me to escort Rose home. I would only need to be there for a few days, just to be sure she arrives safely and all is well at her home. And of course we would need—"

"No." Edmund's answer was swift and hard.

"But..." Lisette struggled for words. "Why ever not?"

Edmund looked at her as though she were dim-witted. "We have been sent to this godforsaken corner of the duchy to rebuild the trust and good reputation of my family with these people." He gestured to the world around him. "I can't very well do that if my own wife is off gallivanting in some foreign country."

"It is only Saldine."

"And you need not go."

Lisette took a slow, deliberate breath and redirected the conversation. "Very well. Then we should discuss arrangements for Rose's travel. A pair of guards to escort her, though I suppose one would be tolerable if you can't spare the two."

"I will send a maid and a coachman," Edmund said between bites of roasted duck.

"And a soldier, of course," Lisette prompted.

He shook his head with a frown. "No soldier. She does not need it." "But, my dear."

He set down his fork with a longsuffering sigh and looked up at Lisette. "If her parents did not mind sending her to you without an escort when she was only thirteen, surely she'll be fine returning to her home with several servants to accompany her. And come to think of it, why do her own parents not send an escort?" He finally turned to look at me.

I couldn't hold his gaze. My parents hadn't sent an escort because I'd convinced them years ago that I was perfectly safe, and very well looked after by Edmund. Yes, I had lied.

"I am as concerned for your welfare as my wife is," Edmund went on, "but I think you'll agree she's overreacting." He went back to his meal, muttering at his plate as he cut off another bite. "She's not a blasted queen. She's not you," he said as he looked up at Lisette. "And I will not waste my resources."

"But, Edmund—"

He slammed his fork down on the table beside his plate and silenced her with a look. All further discussion died.

I held myself together through the rest of dinner, but on my way up to my room, the guard who had insulted me was standing with another guard at the other end of the corridor, and when he saw me, he made no attempt to hide the way his eyes scraped over me. It was all I could do to hold my head high and walk up the stairs. This house had been my haven. But first Lord Farbury had shown up, and then Edmund hit me, and now this guard was looking at me as if he wanted something from me.

I hated it. I hated them all for ruining this small bit of peace that I'd started to believe in. This one place where I'd thought I could fit.

John

It was as if we'd gone backwards. Rose didn't even seem to be trying to wield the knife the proper way. Her return home was fast approaching, and I was desperate to give her as much skill and confidence as I could. I'd put a real knife in her hand and stood beside her so that she could practice thrusting the blade into the air in front of her. But the moment that metal rested in her hand, she'd deflated.

"You act as if you don't truly want to learn," I cajoled, shoving down all my frustrations in the hopes that I could tease her into a better mood.

"Because I don't!"

The smile dropped from my face. Sometimes I forgot how different Rose was from all my other training companions.

"This!" she said, holding the knife out in front of her. "This terrifies me. I hate it. I don't want it in my hand. I don't want to know how to use it." She flung it aside, and the blade planted itself in the earth. Rose pressed the

heels of her hands to her forehead and turned her back on me for a few moments before whirling back. "I don't know that I could use it even if I had to."

Her earnest confession made my heart drop. "Yes, you could." "No, I—"

"Yes," I insisted. "If your life depended on it, you could."

Sudden tears filled her eyes. "If my life must depend on hurting another, I am doomed."

I hated that I understood what she meant. Rose was one of the most tender-hearted people I'd ever met. Not just because it was part of who she was, but because her heart had been broken for a long time. Broken by the betrayal of her countrymen, broken by the loss of her parents. Broken by her constant need to make herself small.

"You are not doomed. You won't be alone. Surely whatever guards go with you—"

"There will be no guards," she yelled in frustration.

Somehow my low opinion of Rockwell sank even lower. "Lord Rockwell is not sending a guard with you?"

"Why would he?" She paced back and forth like a cornered animal, grabbing the staff that leaned against a tree and twisting her hands around it. "He does not know my situation. To him, I am simply his wife's cousin. A gentlewoman, well-bred, but of no true significance. What protection would I need beyond the coachman who will escort me and a maid to keep things respectable?"

An icy dread crawled across my skin. "Rose, you can't go without protection."

She shook her staff at me. "I know that, but what am I supposed to do? There's only so much actual control that I have over my life." She tossed the staff down and covered her eyes with the heels of her hands. "I don't know what else to do."

I was at a loss. The thought of allowing her to make the journey without protection was unthinkable. I wanted to hate Rockwell for it, but with his limited understanding of her situation, I knew Rose was right. They'd given him no real reason to believe that she required a protective escort.

But if Rockwell would not send a guard, what could be done? I would go mad if I had to send her off and just hope for the best. Granted, I'd be going

mad regardless. I hated the idea of being here at Bridgefield while she was off in Saldine, facing her dragons. If I could just go with her...

Wait. Could I?

I forced myself to take a few moments to think through that idea before blurting, "Let me come with you."

She looked up. "What?" The *hope* on her face was so obvious. She didn't try to hide it at all.

"I may not be an official member of any guard. I'm not a soldier. But I have skills. I've been trained by one of the best guards Winberg has. I've ___"

"You don't have to convince me." Again her expression held such unfettered trust that it nearly took my knees out from under me. I watched as relief flooded over her and her lips managed to turn up. Then she stepped toward me, grabbing the front of my shirt and tipping her head back to look at me. "Would you really do it?"

I nodded mutely, my fingers reaching up to rest on the side of her neck. Gads, I wanted to kiss her. "I want nothing more," I finally managed, "but would Lord and Lady Rockwell agree to it?" I asked.

She nodded almost immediately. "I think Lisette could convince him. She's worried too. Neither of us feels good telling Edmund the truth, but it's gotten to the point where we were considering telling him in the hopes that he would send someone with me. But if you would be willing to come..."

"Of course I'm willing. I want to come, Rose." I moved just a little closer. "I need to come."

She let out a little chuckle of relief and then, for just a moment, I could have sworn she raised up on her toes as her eyes darted to my mouth. But I wasn't sure and I hesitated too long, so she retreated and put her arms around me instead, resting her cheek against my heart. She could probably hear it pounding.

"If you're going to come with me...you should probably start calling me Roslyn."

I was confused for a moment, until I realized. "You've been going by a different name this whole time?"

She pulled back and looked up at me. "Just a nickname. My parents often call me Rose. But Saldian society knows me as Lady Roslyn."

I took her hand in both of mine, then let my gaze linger on hers as I said, "It's a pleasure to meet you." I kissed her hand. "Lady Roslyn."

Roslyn

Lisette had agreed to let John go with me, even going so far as to promise to lie to Edmund if he happened to notice that he was missing a groundskeeper. But I realized only three days before we were set to depart that even though John had the physique of a soldier, he didn't have the uniform.

Lisette and I didn't dare to ask Edmund about such a thing, but how else was I going to make John look as legitimate as I needed him to? I thought seriously about stealing one of the uniforms from the laundry, but the theft would no doubt be noticed, and someone would be blamed for it and likely fired if Edmund had any say in the matter.

So then, what? I had been able to keep most of my anxiety at bay since John had agreed to go with me, but now it was all seeping up to the surface. After I stabbed myself three times with an embroidery needle, I tossed the fabric aside and went downstairs, thinking I might find a book or some other distraction in the library. But the library was dim and stuffy and held the memory of the guard asking for my *company*, which only added to my disquiet, and the truth was that I wanted to go find John. I wanted him to make me feel better. I wanted him to help me find a solution. I wanted... him.

I went out the back door and wandered the gardens, hoping I would spot John as he worked. I bent to breathe in the individual blooms of the vibrant flowers, but even the fragrance of so many blossoms did nothing to alleviate the panic that was churning inside me. I gave up and went to the kitchen, hoping to find Jeanie.

Instead, I found Gretchen sitting at the table with a young man. They were smiling, but as soon as he looked up and saw me, his smile dropped

and he shot to his feet. "I was just going back to work." He moved to leave, but Gretchen grabbed on to his sleeve and yanked him back down.

"She's not going to get us in trouble," she said with a roll of her eyes.

His eyes darted from her to me and back.

"I'm not," I said, holding my hands up in an innocent gesture. "I don't even know why you would be in trouble."

Gretchen grinned and bumped her shoulder into his. "See?" Then she turned back to me. "Are you looking for John?"

"Yes. I just needed to ask if—"

"He's over at Sutton. I think he's nervous about protecting you, so he's been putting in extra time with Falstone."

The wave of emotion that rushed over me made my heart warm and melty. "He is?"

She nodded as if it were of no consequence, as if I shouldn't feel the urge to admit to myself that I was falling in love with him. "Thank you," I said vaguely and wandered back out the door.

As I meandered toward the path that would take me to Sutton, I couldn't help feeling woefully undeserving. What would prompt anyone to fight for me the way that John was? Why would he do that for me?

I expected to find him sparring close to Sutton Manor with the others, so I was taken completely off guard when I approached the stream and found John there on the other side.

Crouched down.

Splashing water on his face.

And his chest.

His bare chest.

My feet came to an abrupt halt and I swayed where I stood as I tried to remember how to breathe.

His torso was just as well-defined as his arms, and I couldn't help but stare as rivulets of water ran over his skin.

I sucked a lungful of air through my teeth as he splashed his face one more time then raked his fingers through his hair to push it out of his face.

I'd encountered my fair share of attractive men, but never had my reaction been so visceral. I'd leaned back against that chest in the shed. I'd been wrapped in those arms. On top of all of John's goodness and humor, he could also make me go utterly stupid just by being shirtless.

Gloriously shirtless.

I should leave. I should turn around and walk away and wait for him to be clothed so that I would not make an utter cake of myself by being completely jelly-kneed when he saw me.

Yes, I would do that. I would leave this moment. I would. I didn't.

And then he looked up. He saw me standing there, and his usual friendly grin stretched his face. "Rose," he said as he stood, looking delighted to see me. He grabbed up his shirt from the ground, then jumped the stream and pulled the shirt over his head as he walked toward me, entirely unaware of the fog I was swimming through. Then his face dropped in concern. "Are you all right?"

Was I all right? I looked at the way his shirt stuck to his still-damp skin. On the one hand, I was better than I'd ever been. But on the other hand... why had I come out here? I had needed him. I'd been upset and worked up over something. The trip. Going home. A uniform.

I managed to take a fairly normal breath as he drew closer, and then I focused on my original reasons for being here that were now flooding back. I shook my head to answer his question. "No, not really."

He rested his hands at the side of my neck and tipped my face up so that he could look at me, his thumb caressing just under my jaw. "Tell me what's wrong."

I didn't want to tell him what was wrong. All I wanted was for him to move closer. I looked up into his eyes, terrified and anxious and excited. I wanted to feel what it was like to be kissed. Not just by anyone, but by *him*. Before I returned to my old life, before it got complicated with everything I would have to face, I just wanted the simplicity of feeling his lips on mine. Even if I knew deep down that it would not be simple at all.

My eyes drifted down to his mouth and I let out a shaky exhale, going up on my toes and straining my neck, but he was so much taller than me that I needed him to come down and meet me. And though his head was tilted down to look at me, he was still out of reach. When a flash of fire burned in his eyes, I knew he recognized what I wanted. I could hear his breathing, and he even canted toward me just a bit. I summoned all my bravery and reached up a hand, fisting it in his shirt and tugging gently. He stooped a bit more, coming a little closer, and just when I started to believe that he would allow himself to kiss me, he turned his face away and dropped his forehead to my shoulder.

I took several ragged breaths, confused and disappointed.

Quickly on the heels of that disappointment came *humiliation*. It washed over me and I pinched my eyes shut. I stepped back and pushed away from him, desperate to run home and hide in my room, but he caught my arm, forcing me to stay.

"No, Rose, no," he said gently as he tugged me back into his arms, holding my head against his chest with his large hand. "I just...saints above, I want to kiss you so badly right now, but...you're upset, and I can't when I know you're upset. That would feel...wrong. Tell me what's wrong first and then maybe..."

I shook my head, knowing I should be grateful for how caring and respectful he was being, but my cheeks still flamed with rejection.

"Please, Roslyn. It's me. You came to find me for a reason. Tell me why first."

First. I let that word give me hope. Maybe he really did want to kiss me, and if I just talked first, he might be willing to do just that. So I blurted out, "Uniforms."

He stilled, probably confused. "What?"

I pulled away and he let me step back and out of his reach. I crossed my arms, trying to hold myself together even though a cacophony of fear, want, humiliation, anxiety, and need rampaged through me. "If you are to act as my guard, you need a uniform. But I don't know how to get one."

His brow furrowed in an adorable way. "Is that necessary?"

I nodded. "The best way to prevent an attack is for it to be obvious that I have competent protection. Your size would make people hesitate, but it wouldn't be enough to keep someone from trying if they truly meant me harm. A uniform signals that you have both the defensive and observational skills to defend me."

He blinked. "I don't think I've ever heard you sound so highborn before."

I tightened my arms around myself. "Is that a bad thing?"

He shook his head. "Not at all. It's impressive and...humbling and... gorgeous."

I lifted one shoulder, still not sure if that was good or bad. I'd told him what was wrong, but he didn't look any closer to kissing me. "That's why I came to find you. I don't know what to do."

He took a deep breath and then rested his hands on his hips and cast his gaze toward the sky. In that posture, he looked...delicious. I winced, knowing I shouldn't let my thoughts wander too far in that direction, but he held himself with such confidence and strength that I couldn't *not* notice. Especially after seeing the water traveling over his smooth skin. *Saints, get it together, Rose*.

"Well," he said, then turned to look in the direction of Sutton. "What about Princess Marilee?"

My brow furrowed. "What about her?"

"She might be willing to help. Falstone and Marcus have their own uniforms. I would assume there are extras."

I looked over his frame once more. "Would they fit you?" He gave me a lopsided smile and a shrug. "It's worth a try."

John

I asked Rose to wait for me as I ran back to Sutton Manor. She'd almost kissed me. She'd wanted me to kiss her, but I was a blasted gentleman in manners, though not by birth. So I would work out this difficulty with uniforms and then, hopefully, I could kiss her the way I wanted.

And I definitely wanted.

After I explained the situation to Miriam, whom I found in Sutton's kitchen, she ran upstairs to speak with Her Highness, then returned only a few minutes later with the welcome news that Princess Marilee would be happy to assist us with whatever help we needed, uniforms included.

I hurried back to Rose and found her sitting by the stream, her knees pulled up with her arms wrapped around them, staring at a bundle of flowers in her hand. I was glad to see the flowers. I was worried she'd just been sitting and fretting, but if she'd walked the stream looking for flowers then she must be calmer. Flowers had that effect on her.

"It's all set," I called out as soon as I was close enough for her to hear me.

Her brow jumped even as she looked up at me. "It is?"

"She was more than happy to help," I assured her as I jumped over the stream and sat down beside her.

I'm not sure if it was my words or my presence—maybe both—but she let out a giant sigh and then allowed her head to fall to the side, settling on

my shoulder. "Thank you, John."

"Of course." I reached over and brushed my fingers against one of the flowers in her hand, trying to distract myself when all I could think about was giving her the kiss she'd wanted. "What do you have here?"

"Just"—she brought them to her nose and inhaled, her eyes closing
—"something to help me feel better."

"Did they help?" I asked, enjoying the feel of her leaning into my side.

"Yes, but knowing that Her Highness is willing to assist us is even more help. Thank you for going so quickly."

"Of course." If putting her at ease was always this easy, then caring for her would never be a trial. That is, if I had the chance to care for her...

We sat in silence for several long moments, letting the babbling of the stream and the dancing leaves fill the air and sweep away a little of our worry. As the quiet stretched, the question that wouldn't leave me alone was whether or not I could now kiss her without being a cad. But she seemed content just to lean her head on my shoulder, so I waited.

After a while, Rose raised her head and turned to look at me. "Tell me something I don't know."

I chuckled. "I've already told you about my father."

"Yes, you did," she said with a smile of understanding. "But that means I already know. Tell me something I don't know."

I thought for several moments, grateful for the distraction. "I want my mother to find someone to love again." That was certainly something I'd never said out loud before.

She seemed a little surprised, but her expression was soft when she said, "You do?"

I bobbed my head up and down. "I really do. She deserves...to be taken care of, you know?"

She nodded, and the way her gaze combed over me made me want to lean in right then and there. I'd practically promised I'd kiss her once I'd sorted the uniform problem, and that was taken care of now. "So there. I've told you. Now it's your turn," I said, looking into her eyes and admiring the lovely blue of them. "Tell me something I don't know."

She grinned. "It's going to be my birthday soon."

I liked this bit of information. "Oh really? When?"

"In two weeks."

"You'll be in Saldine by then," I said carefully, not wanting to destroy the good mood.

She nodded.

"How old?" I asked, resisting the urge to play with the strands of hair that rested against her neck.

She looked over and grinned at me. "I like that you don't know."

I shrugged. "It never seemed important enough to ask."

"I'll be eighteen."

"Well then, I'll have to get you a gift."

Even with her arms wrapped around her knees, she rocked back and forth, chewing her lip with nervous energy as she looked at me.

That look made my neck go hot. "In fact," I said, rallying my courage, "I wonder if I could give you your gift right now?"

She blinked slowly up at me, and I could have sworn her breathing came more quickly. She swallowed hard and her eyes fell to my mouth. "What would you give me?" she asked.

I reached out and pushed her hair over her shoulder. Her eyes fluttered closed as my fingers grazed her collarbone. Her neck was so soft and I ached to move closer. "Would you accept a kiss?"

Her eyes opened immediately. "Yes, please," she said in a strained whisper.

My insides all jumped in anticipation, thrilled by her response. I wanted nothing more than to crush my mouth to hers and let my lips communicate the depth of my want. But I couldn't just go charging at her face. I had to do this right. So I swallowed as my heart pounded in my chest and then let myself smile. "Well then, happy birthday."

She looked up at me with wide eyes, her breathing shallow. I leaned in carefully, not wanting to scare her or take advantage, but wanting desperately to end my own aching and just kiss her.

She didn't lean in much, but there was an almost frantic want in her gaze that matched my own, and the way that her chin pushed forward just a little gave me the permission I needed.

At first, I only touched my lips to hers, a gentle brush, but when she made a tiny noise of appreciation, I carefully fit my lips to hers, moving slowly. Her response was somehow timid but enthusiastic at the same time. I raised my hand, sliding it behind her neck, and felt her sigh as she leaned into me more fully.

I continued to kiss her with great care, overwhelmed by the well of feeling that seemed to get deeper by the second. This girl...

We fell into an easy rhythm of push and pull, of coming together and breaking apart and then coming back for more of each other. I had been right. Kissing her was very different from the other lasses I'd kissed. This kiss meant things. Deep, profound things. I would never be the same after this.

As much as I wanted to continue kissing her for hours, or maybe even days, I was determined to do this right, to not push too much. So I pressed my lips firmly to hers one more time and then pulled back, skimming my fingers down the side of her neck and reveling in the feeling of her hands holding on to my forearms to keep herself steady.

She gazed up at me with the look of...well, the look of a woman who had been kissed, and kissed well. Stars above, I loved that look.

"That," I said, needing to tease her if I was going to stop myself from kissing her again, "was quite improper, Lady Roslyn."

She laughed and then her mouth settled into a joyous smile. "Good. A little impropriety makes life interesting."

"Following in your father's footsteps," I said before I realized that she could take my words to mean all sorts of things. Would she take offense?

But she just grinned. "Yes," she said, snuggling into my side. "He would be very proud of me."

Roslyn

Leaving John after he'd kissed me the day before had been torture, but I'd returned to Bridgefield with the distinct feeling that I was walking on clouds. A lovely feeling, that.

The following day, I had to fight the constant urge to go and find him, knowing that I had to focus on packing and preparing for my walk into the mouth of the lion. So I was ecstatic when I walked out onto the terrace after dinner and almost immediately heard a whisper from the bushes at the bottom of the stairs.

"Rose!"

I jumped a bit, but it only took me a few moments of searching the darkness before I identified John's large form crouched in the shadows, looking very much like a boulder.

I glanced behind me to be sure no one inside the house was looking out and then slipped carefully and quietly down the stairs. "What are you doing?" I asked.

He greeted me by putting a hand to my waist and pulling me in for a quick kiss. I nearly floated away even in those brief moments before he pulled back with a grin. "Coming to get you, of course. Will you come with me?"

"Of course," I responded without hesitation and happily took the hand he offered.

We hurried across the lawn, sticking close to the deeper shadows of the house as he towed me behind him. He didn't speak as we neared the stables, but I was too curious to keep quiet any longer. "What are we doing?"

He waited until he had a hand resting on the handle of the stable door before he answered. "There are some people who wanted to say goodbye." He opened the door and there was an immediate shout from within.

"Happy birthday!"

I stumbled back a step in surprise as lanterns were lit and I took in the smiling faces of Emeline, Cecily, Beatrice, Gretchen, and Tyson all shining in the lamplight. There were also several other people I didn't recognize or whose names I could not recall.

"What are you all doing?" I asked once I'd recovered a bit from the shock. "It's not my birthday," I said in dismay, worried that they had misheard or misunderstood.

"Oh, we know that," Gretchen said as she grabbed my hand and pulled me inside. "But you'll be gone for your actual birthday, and we couldn't let you go without celebrating you."

I tried to swallow the lump in my throat. "You didn't have to."

She tilted her head back and let out a dramatic scoffing noise in the way only a twelve-year-old could. "Just say thank you, Rosie."

I laughed even as I fought back tears and yelled, "Thank you!" before engulfing her in a hug.

She pulled back with a grin. "Let's dance."

"Dance?"

"Yes. Someone," she said with a pointed glance at John, "told us that you like to dance."

Another laugh escaped me. "I would love to dance. Especially if the dances aren't stuffy and formal."

"We couldn't be formal if we tried," Tyson muttered.

"Speak for yourself," Gretchen countered, and everyone laughed.

John's hand settled on my back, but he called out to two men sitting in the corner with a pipe and a drum in their hands. "Pryce, Mr. Kenton, give us a tune."

"Before we start the dancing," Cecily said as she stepped forward with a bundle in her arms, "we must do presents first."

My face went numb, so profound was my surprise. They were giving me a gift? I stared at the bundle she held out to me, a look of excited anticipation on her face. Then I blinked back tears.

Gretchen tugged on my arm until I leaned down enough for her to whisper (very loudly) in my ear, "This is another time when you just say thank you."

I laughed but reached out to take the gift from Cecily. "Thank you," I said with deep sincerity. I was so humbled that a woman like Cecily, who worked as a servant and certainly didn't have much to spare, and who hadn't known me for very long, would think to give me a gift.

I unfolded the plain cloth that had been wrapped around it, and a pink garment of some sort fell into my hands. John took the wrapping from me, allowing me to unfold the fabric and see that it was a beautifully knit shawl. "Oh, Cecily. Did you make this?"

She grinned and nodded her head. "Beatrice helped as well."

"Don't let her fool you," said Beatrice from somewhere in the crowd. "It was all Cecily."

"Did you do this just since yesterday?" That's when I had told John about my birthday, but surely this had taken longer than just a day.

"Gracious, no. I've been working on this a little at a time for weeks now. I hope you like it."

"I do! Thank you so much." I reached out and hugged her, feeling awkward doing so, but also like I could do nothing less. Then I pulled back and admired the shawl's softness and color. "I love the pink," I said, overwhelmed by their thoughtfulness and generosity.

"I thought it should be blue," Beatrice said.

"But I decided that pink would suit your coloring better," Cecily stated, putting an end to the argument.

"I've never received such a thoughtful gift. Thank you so much," I said again, this time truly fighting back my tears.

"Now can we dance?" Gretchen said, making no effort to hide her impatience.

"Yes, please," Cecily said.

Apparently Cecily's word held more weight than Gretchen's because the two musicians in the corner burst into a tune as soon as the words were out of Cecily's mouth.

And John's hands were immediately at my waist. His smile was broad and contagious as he stood opposite me and quickly demonstrated the steps of the dance.

Dancing with John that first time out in the forest had been exhilarating and enchanting and something I'd never forget. Dancing among so many wonderful people in a stable filled with laughter and horses and straw was yet another unique experience. The balls and celebrations both in Saldine and in Winhaven had their own kind of appeal and charm. But any enjoyment I'd ever mustered for those occasions had been forced to compete with the censure and judgment of my peers.

Yet, as John twirled me among this throng of common servants, I felt no judgment, no scrutiny. What a gift it was.

John pulled me close, spinning us both in a broad circle. It was easy to follow his lead when he held me so securely. "I've wanted to dance with you again for quite some time," he admitted as he slowed his steps a little.

"Why didn't you ask?"

"It never seemed like the right time."

No, I supposed it wouldn't have, but I was grateful for this moment, for this evening, surrounded by a group of people, most of whom hardly knew me, and yet they had accepted me as one of their own. That was something I'd never really had before, and some of the tension that I kept tucked away in my shoulder eased.

Roslyn

I squeezed Lisette's hand, probably a little too hard, before stepping up into the carriage. I was going.

I was going home, and I wished with everything inside of me that I could be thrilled, excited and full of joyous anticipation. Instead, as we pulled away from Bridgefield, gaining speed, I felt as though I couldn't even think properly.

Hiding away forever wasn't an option, and I didn't actually want to stay in Winberg, especially not under the same roof as Edmund. But returning now, even though my parents were confident in my safety, felt like either the bravest or the most foolish thing I'd ever done.

I sat very still as we reached the main road, watching John as he pulled up alongside us, riding one of Princess Marilee's horses and looking very smart in his newly acquired uniform. If only he could have been inside with me, perhaps he could have kept my heart from racing in a terrified gallop. Instead I had only Everly in the coach with me, and though she was a lovely girl and a competent maid, our relationship had only ever been that of servant and mistress. Her company was a far cry from what John's would have been. Having his strength and warmth beside me would have slowed my thoughts and reminded me that he would keep me safe. Instead I could only watch him and wrap my new shawl more tightly around my shoulders. He didn't ride with the authority of the other guards I had encountered over my many years of court life. He wasn't practiced, stiff and formal. Instead he rode with the sort of carefree abandon that was rare. Though I wished he were sitting beside me, watching him was certainly not a trial, so I did my best to enjoy it and let it distract me from the fact that in three days, I would step back into Saldian society.

When we arrived at the inn that night, John took charge. The coachman offered to go arrange for lodging, but John stepped in, offering to make all the arrangements. He secured a room for me and Everly, and one for him and the coachman. He made certain the rooms were directly across from one another, and after he had dropped my trunk in my room, he leaned down and murmured in my ear.

"My door will be open, so if there is any noise in the hallway, I will hear it."

That unprompted assurance allowed me to actually sleep that night, and each day of travel was filled with the same small gestures. He was always close at hand without smothering me. He took steps to ensure my comfort and safety before I ever had to ask.

He was, quite simply, astounding.

In return, I did all I could not only to show my gratitude, but to take care of him in return. Instead of taking our meals separately, I insisted that he, Everly, and the coachman eat with me. I asked that we stop more often than I needed because I could see John's discomfort. He was not used to riding a horse for so many hours in a row, and on the second day, I insisted he tie his horse to the back of the coach and ride up alongside the coachman for a while. It didn't feel like enough though. I'd never be able to repay him for all he'd given me.

John

We were stopped for lunch on our last day of travel. I had watched for the past three days as Rose—Lady Roslyn. I really needed to start calling her Lady Roslyn—fought to maintain her composure. Sometimes it was a losing battle, but she never stopped trying. I had done everything in my power to ease her mind as we had traveled, but there simply wasn't anything I could do to truly reassure her. I had no idea what we would encounter when we reached her home.

As I escorted her to the carriage with her hand resting on my arm, I reached over with my other hand and laid it over her fingers, then tried to give an encouraging smile. "Next stop, home," I said, knowing that she was at least happy to be returning to her parents.

"Yes," she said, giving me a faint smile. "Onward, Weltshire castle." I blinked in stunned surprise. "You live in a castle?"

She looked over at me, and this time her smile was real. "Yes, I suppose I do."

"Well," I said, helping her up into the carriage. "Very good then."

Her little smirk lifted my spirits even as I reeled a bit at the idea that Rose's—Lady Roslyn's—home was a castle. I tried to clear the thoughts from my mind as I climbed onto my horse. I couldn't be distracted by feelings of inadequacy. Not when she was relying on me to keep her safe.

The next few hours passed quickly, and I was grateful that our journey had not been delayed by rain. I could only imagine the soupy quagmire the roads would have been if we'd had a downpour.

Then we arrived. It was good that she'd told me ahead of time that we were going to a castle, so I was able to keep my gawking to myself. As we started to slow in front of the building, a footman stepped forward to open her door.

She didn't wait for the footman though. In fact, she didn't even wait for the carriage to come to a full stop. She had the door open and was halfway out before the carriage halted. Pulling my horse to a stop, I watched as she ran toward the front steps. At the same moment, the doors flew open and a well-dressed couple came hurrying out.

"Rose!" the woman cried as she ran ahead of her husband. She and Rose met halfway up the steps and threw their arms around each other.

The way that Rose said "Mama" was a wail as she burrowed into her mother's arms.

Her father approached more slowly, a hand pressed to his mouth, like he couldn't believe it was real. His hand was tentative as he reached out and touched Rose's shoulder. Then he engulfed both women in his arms, his face turned to the sky as tears poured down his cheeks.

I handed my horse off to a groom and waited at a distance, watching as Rose's shoulders shook violently as she let out heaving sobs. I tried to imagine what it might be like if I had been forced away from my family for years. Rose's strength and resilience were truly admirable. The strain would have been incredible, and the weight of knowing that others in her country wished her harm must have been heavy.

As much as I wanted to rejoice with her in these moments, I was practical enough, and skeptical enough, to know that letting my guard down would be foolish indeed. I knew her parents believed the threat had passed,

but I didn't. Call it intuition, or maybe it was just Falstone's training, but I could feel that there was something more going on here.

Once Rose had calmed down a little, her parents led her inside, the doors firmly closing after them. I didn't begrudge them their privacy, not a bit. Instead, I happily made myself useful by assisting the footman in unloading Rose's belongings so they could be brought into the castle.

Yes, castle. Rose lived in a castle. I knew it wasn't a royal residence, but it certainly felt like it.

Once everything had been taken away, I turned my attention to the butler, trying to convey a confidence I didn't feel. "Lady Roslyn said I should ask about temporary lodging."

"You can stay the night, of course," he said, then turned to the coachman. "As can you."

The coachman tipped his hat. "Much obliged."

"You both can take dinner and breakfast in the kitchen, and I'm certain the cook will send some food with you when you go on your way in the morning."

He turned to go, but I stopped him. "I'm sorry, sir. You misunderstand. I'll be staying as long as Lady Roslyn has need of me."

He looked baffled. "You plan to stay?"

"I am Lady Roslyn's guard," I said with more confidence than I felt. There was no question of me staying with her, but saying as much to a butler who managed a castle took a fair bit of courage. "Of course I am staying."

He raised an eyebrow at me. "The duke's guard is more than capable."

"I have no doubt," I said with a little bow. "And if Lady Roslyn sees fit to dismiss me, then I'll be on my way. But I cannot take that order from anyone else."

He looked down his nose at me, which was only possible because he stood several steps above me. "Well, I'm certain we'll have everything sorted out by morning."

I was given a bed in the soldiers' barracks that were attached to the back of the castle, and by morning, things were worked out just as the butler had suggested. Roslyn had made it clear that I was staying, and while that raised a few eyebrows, the only stipulation of my staying was that I would meet with the captain to be sure I deserved the position.

Captain Sterling turned out to be a firm but kind man who seemed to take a genuine interest in me. He tested my fighting abilities first, which left him impressed, and then moved on to general protocols and routines. How to stand, salute, walk. When to talk and when not to. I was eager to learn all of it. If it could help me protect Roslyn, I wanted to know it all. He seemed happy with my progress, and I was welcomed among the other soldiers more easily than I would have expected. Apparently, all that training that I'd done with Falstone and Marcus had paid off.

Over the next several days, I barely managed a few glimpses of Rose. And while I absolutely understood her need and desire to spend all her time with her parents, and while I was grateful for the instruction I was receiving, I still missed her. And in my more uncertain moments, I couldn't help doubting that she missed me.

Roslyn

My breathing was shallow as I stood just inside the doorway of my old room. It was just how I had left it, though it had clearly been cleaned and cared for regularly. Everything in this space was so familiar. The trunk sitting at the end of my bed that I knew held mounds of embroidery and lace. The ornate wardrobe that was beautiful, but that always tried my patience because one door always stuck. The piles of books and art supplies.

I went further into the room, letting my fingers trail over the collections of dried flowers, the vials filled with perfumes that my father had liked to buy me, and the quilt that my mother had sewn.

It was all there, and it made me ache for all the lost time. I wondered if this ache would ever leave, or if it would just become a part of me. Another hurt unhealed, another story buried deep. I didn't want it to become that, but I was not yet willing to share that ache with my mother. She was already carrying so much regret that I couldn't bring myself to add to it.

I was only left alone in my room for a short time before Everly joined me.

"It's a beautiful home, miss. I mean, my lady."

I smiled, not blaming her for the slip-up at all. She'd been with me since Winhaven, and Miss Rose felt just as much like me as Lady Roslyn did. Though neither fit exactly right.

"Shall we ready you for dinner?" she asked.

"Yes, please."

I did my best to let the routine of dressing set me at ease. But everything felt so familiar and yet so foreign that it was hard to relax.

Once I rejoined my parents, it got easier, and as the next few days passed, my home started to once again feel like a true home.

Being with my parents was...almost indescribable. My mother was constantly putting an arm around my shoulders or reaching out to squeeze my hand. The constant reminders that she was there and that she loved me were filling a void inside of me that I hadn't recognized was there before now. I could look back now and see that that same void had been eased by my time with Emeline and the others at Sutton. It had even been filled a bit by John's mother. But having that aching void ease once in a while was so different from having it filled by my own parents and the sense of safety and security that I felt here.

So I soaked it up. I sat by the fire, embroidering or sewing with my mother, and read in the library with my father. We roamed the grounds, and my mother got the castle's gardener to show me all of the new flowers that were in bloom. There was an entire corner of the garden that was new and which had been dedicated to me. Each time my mother had become distraught with missing me, she had worked with the gardener to choose another plant to add.

The cook made me all my favorite dishes, many of which I hadn't eaten since leaving here more than four years ago. And we laughed together when we discovered that my taste had changed enough that some of my old favorites were no longer appetizing. My mother treated it like a great game of exploration to discover all my new likes and dislikes.

Meanwhile, my father seemed both awed and saddened by the changes he saw in me.

"You're staring again," I said at dinner on my fifth night at home.

My father smiled. "It's going to take me a good while to get used to this version of you. You just look so different."

I smiled. There was nothing I could say to that. I knew I looked different, and we'd had this conversation several times already.

"It will be lovely to see you all dressed up for the ball next week," my mother said.

I groaned. "Don't remind me."

"What's the matter? It's going to be wonderful."

I almost smiled at my mother's forced optimism. "It won't be wonderful. It never has been."

"But things are different now," she stated.

"Are they?" I challenged. "Do the nobility suddenly hate us less?"

"It's not all of them," my father argued.

"Just the most powerful ones."

"You cannot spend your whole life running. That's no way to live," he said in a way that told me this was something he'd thought about long and hard. "We will make a good impression on the king and queen, show everyone how thrilled we are with the birth of the little prince, and things will settle."

I took a deep breath as that same old fear started to tighten my chest. "I worry we are being naive."

My father's eyes were understanding but confident. "I believe everything will work out. It's been years since the threats were made. Prince Marcos remains in good health. The little prince is healthy and strong. And you cannot be in hiding forever."

His surety eased some of my worry. "I know. And I am so glad to be home."

It was time for bravery, I supposed. Because he was right. I could not hide away, scared, for the rest of my life.

It was time to start living.

I missed John. I hadn't sought him out in the six days since I'd returned home, mostly because I wanted to be with my parents as much as possible, but also because I wanted to avoid a scandal. He had been taken into the employ of Captain Sterling, and I remembered too well the way the guard at Bridgefield had judged me for the time I spent with John. The awful assumptions he'd made. So I couldn't in good conscience seek him out, at least not publicly.

I would have to take care, but it was difficult when I ached to spend time with him. To that end, I woke up earlier than usual and tucked myself into a narrow side hallway that branched off of the corridor that led to and from

the kitchen. This was the hour when the soldiers took their morning meal, and I hoped to catch John as soon as he finished.

Several soldiers came out of the kitchen, dispersing to their different posts around the house. I kept waiting and started to despair that perhaps John had gone outside instead of coming through the house, but then the door creaked open again. I looked around the wall I was hiding behind and saw that it was him coming down the corridor, and he was alone.

I waited until he was passing by my little hiding spot and then reached out, grabbing hold of his sleeve and pulling him toward me.

I hadn't meant to have him stumble and end up with his body pressed to mine as my back leaned against the wall, but I wasn't about to complain.

Looking up at him, I saw that his eyes were wide and surprised, but that surprise quickly morphed into a crinkle-eyed grin. "Good morning, milady."

I bit my lip, tempted to kiss him right there and then. But then I remembered our need for secrecy.

"Come with me," I said, scooting out from between him and the wall.

"Where are we going?"

"You need to get to know the castle." I grabbed his hand and pulled him farther down the narrow hallway.

"Does it have its own personality?"

"Yes, and its own secrets." I reached behind a tapestry that hung beside the arched entry to the servants' stairs and felt for the hidden latch.

"Really? What kind of secrets?"

"The kind lurking behind tapestries." I undid the latch with a click and enjoyed how John's brow rose in surprise when I pushed the tapestry aside and the door swung open.

"A secret passage? Really?"

I grinned. "Really."

He sighed. "I feel like this should have been part of my security training."

I shook my head and pulled him through the secret doorway. "Only the most trusted of people are told about these passageways. After all—" I paused for effect as the door closed behind us and plunged the passage into darkness. "What if it's the soldiers we have to hide from?"

"Are you saying you don't trust your own guards?"

"We trust them. But you never know what the future holds." I tugged on his hand but met resistance.

"Don't we need a lantern or a candle?"

"Are you afraid of the dark, John?" I teased.

"Just afraid of injuring myself. I don't want to ruin your view for the next time I'm working up in the trees. Oof!" he said when I jabbed my elbow back and hit him in the ribs. Then he chuckled in the darkness. "I was kidding, of course. Mostly I just don't want to get lost and starve to death."

"Don't worry. I know the way," I assured him. As long as I kept one hand on the wall, I could navigate this passage easily.

His resistance melted and he allowed me to tug him forward. "Will I need to duck?"

I chuckled. It was a fair question. "No. This passage is just as tall as the regular hallways."

"Are you sure you know where you're going? Even after being away from home for four years?"

"Yes. My mother and I often used these passages more than the regular corridors."

"Why?"

"My mother has never gotten used to living this life. Being waited on and looked after still makes her uncomfortable, though she hides it well now. It was just easier for her to be herself if she wasn't worried about servants judging or resenting her."

"Did they? Resent her?"

"I don't know. Most of me thinks that no, they were all kind and happy for the jobs they had. But another part of me thinks there must have been some that resented her. How could they not?"

He stayed quiet, and I started to get nervous. Was he thinking about what it might be like to be with me? We cared for each other, of course. But we hadn't spoken seriously about what our future would be, and it occurred to me that I may have just given him a reason to stay away from me.

"Where are we going, anyway?" he asked after a while, and my nerves quieted. He didn't sound nervous or like he'd just realized we could never have a future. He sounded...like John. Curious and teasing.

"We're going to the library."

"Are you planning to teach me to read?" he asked with a little laugh, as if the idea were silly. "If you'd like," I responded in all seriousness. "We're turning to the left now. You might want to put out your other hand so you know where the wall is."

"This is disconcerting."

"But you trust me, don't you?"

"Of course."

A little fire lit in my chest. He said it so easily.

"Plus," he said, the teasing tone back in his voice, "I know how much you like my pretty face."

I laughed under my breath but didn't contradict him.

After another minute, I slowed. "Here it is," I said, feeling along the wall for the mechanism that would allow the wall to swing inward.

"Wait a moment," John said, and I felt his hand settle on my hip. "Aren't we going to utilize this passageway?"

I smiled, hearing the mischievous tone in his voice and wondering what it meant this time. "Utilize how?" I asked.

I felt him move closer to me, and while the hand on my hip moved to my lower back, I felt his other hand settle on my upper arm before skimming up to pass over my shoulder, then up my neck before cradling my cheek. "Oh," I said. Yes, I liked this idea a lot. I tilted my face up and reached out so that I could wrap my arms around his broad torso.

His fingers moved from my cheek to my chin and I held my breath, sensing that his face hovered just above my own. Then he let out a tremulous sigh. "I've missed you, Rose."

I closed my eyes as heat rushed over my shoulders and down to my fingertips. "Likewise," I said, pushing up on my toes in the hopes that I could find his lips with mine.

"I should probably start calling you Roslyn," he said just before pressing a kiss to the corner of my mouth.

"I don't care what you call me," I said.

"You don't?" He tilted my chin the other way and pressed a second kiss to the other corner of my mouth.

"Call me whatever you like. Just kiss me already."

He let out a quiet chuckle. "I am, and ever will be, your obedient servant." His lips settled against mine, finally. But this kiss was different than before. This was comfortable and soft. There was no rush. We had nowhere to go and nothing calling our attention away, and there was

certainly no risk of being discovered. So we took our time, savoring, exploring, breathing each other in.

When he finally pulled his mouth from mine, he didn't step back. Instead, he pulled me into his arms, letting me rest my head against the beating of his heart. "You," he said after several long moments, "are extraordinary. Strong. Vibrant. Beautiful."

"Terrified," I said, unable to bear his flattery. I had spent so much time running from those who disliked me that the idea of turning to face them was almost inconceivable.

"Brave," he corrected. "Bravery happens when we move forward despite the terror."

I clung to him tighter. "What if I can't move forward?"

"You will," he whispered into my hair.

I just hoped he was right.

John

The celebratory ball would start in less than an hour. When Rose had made it clear to her parents that she required my protection in addition to her own parents' men, her father had arranged for a uniform to be provided to me—one with the Duke of Weltshire's own crest on it. He wanted to be sure that anyone who saw me close to Roslyn knew that I was there in an official capacity, a protective capacity.

So there I stood in the entry hall, my new uniform fitting better than the one we'd gotten from Sutton Manor. And with the duke's crest on my chest—with Lady Roslyn's crest on my chest—I felt more focused and determined than ever before.

When she appeared at the top of the stairs, I realized that I had had it in my head that she would stand there and smile, looking beautiful and regal, and then float down the steps. What truly happened was so much better. I heard her before she appeared. She was arguing with her mother.

"Of course I don't want us to be late," she said as she came into view, walking with a hurried step and then turning to her mother in exasperation. "But did we truly not have time for me to put on my other shoe?" She held up the dancing slipper in one hand.

Her mother looked chagrined. "I didn't realize. Of course you can put your other shoe on. I was just anxious and—"

Rose put her empty hand on her mother's arm. "I know. I'm nervous too." She opened her mouth again, but it took her several moments to get her next words out. "I'm terrified."

"Oh, Rose, I'm sorry," her mother said, running a hand over her daughter's hair. She did that a lot. It seemed she needed constant reassurance that Rose was here and real and well. "But I know all will be well." She cut off abruptly, as though remembering something. "Do you remember all the dances? Have you had the chance while—"

"Yes," Rose was quick to assure her. "I fell a bit out of practice while living with Uncle Richard, but being a guest at the palace in Winhaven gave me plenty of opportunities to practice."

"Good. I'm certain everything will be fine. Lovely. Wonderful, even!" the duchess said with too much enthusiasm. "We could even pretend this is all for you. A birthday celebration."

Rose shook her head. "It's a fun idea and might have some merit, except these people are not those I would want to celebrate with. Let's save any birthday wishes for tomorrow, shall we?"

"Yes, of course." The duchess smoothed down the front of her dress. "I'm just nervous, about everything."

"I know," Rose said with so much love in her eyes. Even her frustration with her mother was drenched in joy and love. "Just let me put my shoe on, and we can both try to put on a brave face."

Her mother nodded and squeezed the hand that her daughter offered.

Rose stepped down one stair and then sat abruptly on the top step, forcing her skirts out of the way so that she could see her foot well enough to put her shoe on. As she was pulling it over her heel, Everly rushed around from behind her and crouched on the stairs in front of Rose—Lady Roslyn. "Allow me, my lady," she said before propping Roslyn's foot on her knee and making quick work of tying the ribbons around Roslyn's ankle.

"Thank you," both she and her mother said to Everly, and then Roslyn grabbed hold of the stair railing and pulled herself to her feet, shaking her skirts out as if she were already annoyed with them. As she came down the stairs, she finally looked down and caught my eye. It made my heart swell to see her grin as soon as she saw me and then roll her eyes, bringing me in on the silliness of what had just transpired.

I fought hard not to grin back. One of the most difficult things about being her guard was that I had to play the part. I had to be stoic and aloof. I couldn't go grinning at her, and I didn't want to be caught staring at her like the love-struck fool that I was. So I smothered the smile, relieved and proud to see that this dressed-up, noble version of Roslyn was very much the same Rose I had gotten to know in the forest around Bridgefield.

I did my best to stay out of the way as the family got into the carriage, and then I climbed onto my horse.

Traveling the country roads to the royal palace only took about half an hour, and with the dim light and my unfamiliarity with these lands, it was easy to stay focused, constantly looking out for any possible threat or danger. Still, it was a relief to have the duke's soldiers following behind the carriage as well. The responsibility wasn't only on me now.

But when we entered the township surrounding the palace, it became more difficult to focus. I'd lived in Murrwood my whole life. I'd never been to a town as large as this one, and I certainly had never seen anything to compare with the majesty of the royal palace. It took all my concentration not to be distracted by the grand, elaborate gardens, the number of carriages rolling their way toward the palace, and the crush of people climbing the marble steps that led to a door so large that I wondered how the weight of it could possibly swing open and shut.

When Rose's carriage came to a stop, I pulled myself together, dismounting and handing the reins to a waiting footman as I saw the other soldiers do. Then I waited close by for the family to emerge.

His grace stepped out, and instead of letting a footman assist his wife from the carriage, he turned and did it himself. Even more surprising, he turned to catch my eye and then tilted his head toward the open carriage door. He wanted me to help Rose—Roslyn—from the carriage.

I was proud of myself for simply nodding and stepping forward. I glanced inside and caught Rose's eye. She smiled at me for just a moment, and then I watched her transform.

It was fascinating. At first I thought she was just straightening her spine and preparing for battle. But then she scooted forward and put her hand out. She placed her fingers delicately in mine, and when I looked back at her face, it was like I was looking at someone else. The grace with which she moved and the way she held her expression were decidedly un-Rose-like as she stepped out of the carriage and into the blazing light of the torches that

lined the stairs. This—I realized as she released my hand and arranged her skirts while avoiding the appearance that she was fussing with them—was Lady Roslyn. Her smile was reserved and serene. Her eyes swept the area, pausing to bow her head when a passerby caught her eye.

She'd been away from her position in society, playing the role of Rose for the past four years, and yet her noble grace was effortless as she followed her parents. I followed four paces behind and did my best to remind myself of all the rules that Captain Sterling had tried to drill into me in the short time that we'd had to prepare for these circumstances.

She was Lady Roslyn, and I must ensure her safety at all costs.

Roslyn

The moment I stepped into the ballroom, I wished that my eyesight were not so keen. If the world around me had been fuzzy, I would not have noticed every look. I would not have seen the way people gawked or sneered or turned up their noses.

My mother slipped her hand around mine and squeezed. "Remember what we practiced."

I nodded. My mother had been doing this for far longer than I had, and she had taught me the secrets to navigating this horrible situation. So I let my eyes glide over the crowd, never letting them stop long enough to catch anyone's eye. I kept my face pleasant, but not smiling. I would not acknowledge the rudeness of others who refused to acknowledge me.

I took a steadying breath and we moved into the room together.

For the first several minutes, I felt I was doing quite well. Those who did dare to address us did so with varying motives—curiosity, disdain, a wish to gather gossip—but I treated them all with the same distant kindness that I'd seen my mother use for so many years.

Then my gaze snagged on a familiar face. It had been four years, but the sneering visage of Neil Ravenna wasn't something I was likely to forget, and all of my poise shattered. Instead of letting my eyes skim over him and move on, I was snared by his hostile gaze. His expression said that my very presence was an affront to all he held dear. My breath quickened as childhood hurts and present fears combined to steal any semblance of serenity I had been holding on to. It was a terrible thing to be hated.

I did my best to calm myself, but instead my stomach continued to tighten and my palms started to burn.

Until a hand pressed to my back. "Steady on," John said from just behind me.

I finally broke my gaze away from Neil's and focused instead on the warmth of his hand pressed to the middle of my lower back.

"I'm right here," he said so only I could hear.

My breathing slowed and after a moment, I looked back to Neil. He had the gall to smile, a grotesque twist of his mouth, but then he looked away to acknowledge the gentleman who was approaching him.

Everett. That was just my luck. Not one, but both of my worst childhood tormentors. They spoke for a moment and then Everett's eyes darted up, searching the crowd until they landed on me. I raised my chin and lifted my eyebrows, trying to look brave, but my courage failed me and I dropped my gaze.

"So, who are the fools standing over there, looking like your presence is offensive?" John asked as he stepped to my side. From the corner of my eye, I could see that he stood straight and alert, his hands now folded behind his back, and he didn't look at me, but I knew that was because, as my guard, he had to keep his focus on potential threats, not on me. Normally, a guard wouldn't have stayed so close to me, but we had all agreed that making it clear that I had protection close at hand was a wise precaution.

I let out a sigh, grateful to have his steady presence beside me. So he had noticed them, and no doubt many others had noted their hostile stance. "Those are the boys who used to torment me. The taller one is Lord Everett Malladon. And the shorter one, who looks as if he smelled something awful, is Lord Neil Ravenna."

It wasn't as if I hadn't expected to see them. But knowing something was going to happen and actually experiencing that thing were very different. Both Lord Everett and Lord Neil looked so put together. They weren't awkward, gangly youth anymore. They were men of power and position, and even though I outranked them, I certainly didn't feel that way. I felt insignificant and wrong, the way I always felt around them.

"These are the sons of the men who are likely behind the plot to kill you?"

"Don't say it like that. We don't know that for sure." And hearing the words out loud made all my fears rear up.

His eyes cut over to me for just a moment, like he wanted to argue the point. Instead he just said, "As you wish," then looked back at the crowd. His eyes narrowed immediately. "They are coming this way."

I sucked in a breath through my nose, bracing for impact but refusing to watch as they approached. I chose instead to look in the direction of the raised dais where the king and queen sat and tried to scrape together all of my courage, but it wasn't enough.

"Well," Neil said as he stopped in front of me, "if it isn't the gutterling." His grin was boorish, making him look so much like his younger self.

I pressed my lips together and my nostrils flared, hurt and angry and humiliated that he would so casually call me by that horrid name. I felt John stiffen behind me, but he didn't move. I wanted to say something in my defense, but no words came.

"Ease up, Neil."

My eyes darted to Everett, shocked that he would stand up to Neil, and even more shocked that it was in my defense.

My shock only increased when Everett bent into a small bow in my direction. "Welcome home, Lady Roslyn."

I blinked, stunned. Was he mocking me?

"Ev, what are you doing?" Neil asked in an annoyed whisper. "This halfbreed doesn't deserve your respect."

This time, John did move. He stepped around me and planted himself between Neil and me. "Do you have anything else to say to Lady Roslyn?" he asked in a menacing tone.

I had to lean to the side to see around John's frame. Neil was chewing on the inside of his cheek even as he sneered, and his eyes roamed over John's uniform and down to the hand that John had rested on the hilt of his sword. Then he gave a haughty lift of his brow and said, "That's all." He cut his eyes over to me and curled his lip. "For now." He took a swig of his drink before turning his back and walking away.

I suppressed a smile. It was lovely to see Neil so thoroughly humbled, especially when it was John doing the humbling. As soon as Neil was gone, John stepped out of the way and settled behind me once more.

Everett remained, watching Neil's retreat, and when his eyes returned to me, he grimaced. "I apologize for Lord Neil. Apparently, he is under the impression that we are all still children and that such behavior was ever acceptable."

It took me a moment to push past my stunned surprise and find my words. "Is that an apology?" I asked, unable to mask the doubt in my voice.

"No, this is," he said with his hands behind his back as he looked me in the eye. "The way I treated you when we were children was abominable. I am loath to think about the pain I must have caused you, and I will not try to give any excuse for it. I'm sorry, Lady Roslyn. I won't ask for your forgiveness, but I hope to earn it someday."

My heart squeezed. It was an apology I had never expected to receive, and having it given so unexpectedly left my heart a little raw, but also hopeful. "Thank you, Lord Everett."

He gave a bow. "I shall leave you in peace. Good evening, my lady." I blinked in shock for several moments and then turned to John. "That was...unexpected."

He was staring after Everett, his brow furrowed. "Do you believe him?" he asked, turning his eyes to me.

All the broken bits of my younger self wanted nothing more than to think Everett had finally decided I was worthy of kindness. I let out a sigh. "I'd like to. But believing him seems rather foolish." Still, even if he didn't mean it, at least he was being outwardly pleasant. That counted for something, didn't it?

My parents rejoined me, and together we started to make a large circle around the room. My parents wanted everyone to see me, but we were also slowly making our way over to the king and queen. It was important that we pay our respects, and we all hoped that if Their Royal Highnesses greeted me pleasantly, everyone else would follow suit.

But I had my doubts. As we made our way through the crowd, allowing ourselves to be seen but avoiding any significant interactions, I watched as news of who I was and what that meant filtered through the crowd. Most didn't seem openly hostile, and I had to credit the birth of the new prince for that. Still, few actually looked welcoming.

We made it to the throne dais and waited for the couple in front of us to finish greeting the royal couple. I remembered King Terius always being stuffy, and he still was. His first queen had always been kind to me, and she had been the one to send my parents the warning about the danger I was in. But I didn't know anything about this new queen. She was younger than his first wife but held herself with poise and just the right amount of indifference. To the right of the king sat Prince Marcos. He was nine years old now and looked far less fragile than I remembered him as a small child. Between the royal couple sat a bassinet with a sleeping infant inside. The

baby, Prince Geralt, was the reason for the celebration and seemed content to be on display.

When the couple in front of us moved on, I stayed one step behind my parents and curtsied when they did.

"Rise," the king said, and we stood. His eyes cut to me. "I see your daughter has returned."

"She has indeed, Your Majesty. We are most grateful to have her home." My father always did the talking in these situations.

"Ah, yes," the young queen said. "I had heard you were away. Are you glad for the birth of my child?" she asked, tilting her head toward her sleeping baby. "Or is it a disappointment?" Her words were blunt and shocking, but she said them in such a neutral tone that I had no idea if she was just curious or if she was suspicious of my motives. I suddenly worried about how my sudden return at this moment might be viewed.

Still, it took me only a moment to respond since I was more than happy to tell her the truth. "I am overjoyed by this blessed occasion, my queen. To know that the crown will stay securely in your royal line is glorious news indeed," I told her in all sincerity.

She studied me for a few moments more before allowing a small smile to curve her mouth. "I couldn't agree more."

"Enjoy the evening," King Terius said in dismissal, and we each bent low before moving on.

"Well," my mother said as she walked close beside me. "I think that went well."

"Yes," my father agreed. "You handled that wonderfully, Roslyn."

"I only told the truth."

He looked down at me and smiled. "Exactly."

We found a spot close to the dance floor where we could all watch without looking like we were avoiding anyone. I expected we would stay there for some time before moving strategically around the room, but after only one dance, Everett approached me.

He greeted my parents first. "Your Graces, how are you?"

"Lord Everett," my father replied with reserved politeness. "It's a lovely evening."

"It is. I was wondering if I might have the pleasure of dancing with your daughter." He looked to me.

I startled at the suggestion. His apology had been astounding enough, but actually inviting me to dance?

I could hear my father's confusion when he answered, "If she wishes."

Everett—Lord Everett—offered his hand. "Lady Roslyn?"

It was only because of my many years of practice that I was able to settle my hand in his with a polite nod even while my insides squirmed with confusion.

He led me out onto the dance floor and part of me tensed, fully expecting him to say or do something snide, rude, or controlling. Perhaps he would pinch my arm or step on my foot like he had done so many times as a child.

Instead he was a perfect gentleman. He didn't pull me too close. He wasn't forceful. He was polite and engaging and almost...kind?

"You seem to have gained the queen's favor," he commented.

"Have I?" I asked with genuine curiosity. "This is my first time meeting Her Majesty, so I have no idea what her favor would look like."

He smiled as though amused by my honesty. "She spoke to you and she smiled. That's a rarity."

"Oh." I wanted to be happy at the news, but instead I had to wonder if such favor would work against me instead of for me.

He looked concerned. "Do you not wish for the queen's favor?" he asked.

"Of course I am gratified to have it," I said without expounding. Just because he was not being unpleasant didn't mean I would confide in him.

"Did you mean what you said?"

I looked at him with confusion. "What I said?"

"About being happy that the little prince had been born?"

Apparently, Everett had been standing close enough to hear our conversation. I hadn't seen him there. "Yes, of course. That child means that I no longer have to worry about the throne falling to me."

He looked puzzled. "And that is a good thing?"

"Most assuredly," I said. If he understood nothing else about me, I wanted him to understand this, and to spread it far and wide. "The last thing that I want is to rule a kingdom."

He held my gaze, perhaps looking for the lie in my words, but eventually he said, "I believe you" just as our dance ended.

I curtsied and he bowed to end the dance.

"Has someone else already claimed the next dance?" he asked.

I managed not to scoff at the idea. "No. And I doubt anyone will."

"Where might I escort you?"

I had seen John waiting close to the food and drink tables. "I need something to drink."

"Refreshments it is."

He offered his arm, and I was surprised that I felt at ease taking it. His pace was even. Not hurried, but not dawdling either. He held his head high and acknowledged the curious looks we received with calm authority.

When we reached the refreshment table, I released his arm and gratefully reached for a goblet of wine. I was tired from maintaining the public facade that I always wore in these situations, but the goblet felt familiar in my hand and I happily swirled the deep-red liquid in the glass and then held it under my nose, inhaling deeply.

"Still sniffing things, are you?" Everett commented.

My eyes shot to him, and any good feeling left from the fragrant aroma was gone. I glared.

He held up a staying hand, looking remorseful. "Sorry. I didn't mean it as an insult. It was actually...I appreciate the familiarity of it. You've changed a great deal, but that hasn't changed. I find it strangely comforting."

I looked away and shook my head, not ready to trust his sincerity, and as I did, I noticed John taking up an unobtrusive position nearby. Or at least as unobtrusive as a man his size could be.

"I always found your penchant for aromas amusing. I remember you declaring you liked my smell the first time we met." He sounded friendly, but I remembered all too well the way he and Neil had mocked me just because I liked the smell of flowers, how they'd shoved my face into bushes.

"That was before you decided to hate me," I challenged, still not looking at him.

"I never hated you."

My eyes darted to his and my jaw clenched. "Lies."

"I didn't," he insisted, and when I continued to stare, he sighed in frustration.

"You can keep trying, Lord Everett," I finally said, "but I'm not going to believe you. Not about this." I had an entire vault of memories devoted to how much he'd hated me, and while I might not be able to stand up to Neil's sneering, I wouldn't let Everett lie to my face.

He studied me, nodded, dropped his eyes, and swallowed before lifting his face to look at me again. "I'm sorry for the hurt I caused."

"Thank you for the apology," I said, knowing it would never make up for the damage he had caused.

"I meant it, and I hope you at least believe that I do not hate you now."

"Perhaps," I said, forcing my tone to remain neutral. I preferred that he stay unbalanced around me, and if vagueness could accomplish that, then so be it.

He held my gaze, but when I said nothing further, he relaxed. "And who knows." He smiled and stepped close, dropping his voice so only I could hear. "Perhaps we will learn to do more than just tolerate each other in the future."

My eyes widened, but he immediately walked away before I could form a coherent thought, much less a coherent response. I was frozen and stunned. Had Everett just...flirted with me? Was he so changed that he found something in me to like, even after a childhood filled with animosity? Unthinkable.

It wasn't until someone jostled past me that I shook off my shock. I left the refreshments behind, the goblet still in my hand as I sought a less crowded corner of the ballroom. I could sense John's presence as he trailed behind me, ever at hand.

I found a space tucked beside the raised dais of the king's and queen's thrones. It was far from the dancing, and now that the little prince had been taken to bed and the king and queen were mingling, the area was largely unoccupied. Large urns with overflowing foliage sat on either side of it. I stood beside one such urn, taking a sip of my wine as I looked out on the crowd and tried not to appear as off-kilter as I felt. My instinct was to shrink, but I needed to be serene. Confident, calm and always in control.

John took up position a couple paces behind me, his back to the wall. I turned to the side so that I could see both the dancing and him in my periphery.

After several moments, he spoke up. "That was a curious conversation." I resisted the urge to turn and look at him directly. "Curious how?" I knew why I had found it curious, but what was John's opinion of it, and how much had he heard?

"You used to like the way that weasel smelled?"

I couldn't resist the small smile that tugged on my lips. "You know I enjoy all kinds of scents."

"Yes, indeed. It just hadn't occurred to me that some of those scents would be attached to an eligible gentleman."

"He was only a boy at the time, and he made my young life miserable," I reminded him.

"You do not look miserable now."

I turned to face him, not caring how it looked, only needing to know what he meant by that.

He moved his hand in the tiniest of placating gestures. "And I'm grateful for that. I have no wish to see you tormented. I just..." He shifted his weight.

My brow rose. "Are you...jealous?"

He huffed a breath and then shrugged, moving close enough that he was almost standing next to me, but not quite. He looked out at the crowd and swallowed. "Yes. Yes, I am," he admitted.

I'd never seen him look so humbled, except perhaps when Gretchen had called him a show-off.

I allowed my own gaze to return to the dancers and lifted my goblet to my lips. "Good," I murmured before taking a sip.

He bent his head and lowered his voice. "Were you trying to make me jealous?"

I shook my head but suppressed a smile. "Of course not. I'm not that devious."

"Then why are you smiling?"

I kept my eyes on the dancers. "Because jealousy indicates more than just a passing interest."

He moved infinitesimally closer so that his arm brushed the sleeve of my gown. "I would have thought there were a great many things I've done that indicated more than just a passing interest."

I looked over my shoulder at him as I thought of our time in the shed. The first dance we'd shared. The birthday kiss. The secret passageway. Everything. I wanted more of it.

His nostrils flared, then he pulled his eyes away from mine. "I'd love to show you what I mean, but since we are in a crowded ballroom with many curious onlookers, I will keep my distance." He stepped back, nearly to the wall, and I felt the loss keenly.

This was why I had fallen in love with Bridgefield. This was why I did not like having to play by society's rules. I could turn myself into a very pretty picture here, but I couldn't be myself.

John

Though she kept her grace and poise, the light seemed to seep out of her as soon as I stepped back. It tore at my heart, but I kept my distance. I was too aware of the eyes on Lady Roslyn, the way that people stole furtive glances or slowed their step as they walked by. I refused to endanger her reputation or fuel rumors that were likely already flying.

But as I continued to watch her, I realized just how alone she was in this crowd of hundreds. I knew she did not have even one true friend among these people. Perhaps that was why she was so willing to listen to Lord Everett's golden lies. No doubt she wanted to believe an ally among these people was possible. But was it? I didn't know, and the importance of keeping a watchful eye and ensuring her safety became more pressing.

However, about halfway through the evening, something shifted. I couldn't say what the cause was, but another gentleman approached Lady Roslyn with an invitation to dance. She seemed surprised, but willing. When that dance was finished, another man stepped up and took a turn spinning her about the dance floor. For the second half of the evening, Roslyn spent more time engaged in a dance than she did on the sidelines. It was a dramatic change, and it made me suspicious. Was it Lord Everett's acceptance of her that had made the difference? Had something about their interaction with the king and queen inspired this interest?

I kept my eyes glued to her the whole time, afraid that one of her partners was going to whisk her out into the night, never to be seen again, or that a conniving young miss would accidentally spill a drink down Roslyn's back. I didn't know what to expect, but the sudden and unexplainable acceptance of her presence did not feel genuine, and when she took a breather, standing close to where I had taken up position, I wished to share my concerns with her, but I worried they would cause her pain. What if she was finally feeling as if people here accepted her? Did I really want to take away that hope? Would sharing my concerns make her think she needed to keep hiding?

She glanced over at me, her eyes uncertain before returning to the dance floor. "This is strange." Her eyes darted over to me once again. "The way people are acting—it is strange, isn't it?"

I mentally sighed, grateful I wasn't the one who would have to say it. "It does seem a little odd, Milady."

Her shoulders drooped. "I thought so."

I wanted to say more, to hear more of what she was feeling about the situation, but her mother arrived at her side right then, slipping her arm through Roslyn's and leading her away to speak with someone. I knew it would be one of three couples, because I'd paid attention, and there were only three couples who were willing to be on friendly terms with Her Grace. Despite Roslyn's sudden increase in popularity among the gentlemen, her parents had continued to be merely tolerated.

Roslyn

The entire evening had been a strange whirl, filled with complex and competing emotions, and motives that I didn't understand. My parents and I had tried to make sense of it on the ride home, but in the end, they had chalked it up to good fortune. "You see?" my mother said. "I knew their disgruntled anger would be appeased once the threat of you inheriting was put to bed."

I didn't contradict her, but I didn't agree either. I kept wondering if it was the king and queen's kindness that had changed everyone's opinion, or if—possibly—Lord Everett's attention had made the difference.

Now it was the middle of the night, but as exhausted as I was, sleep would not come. Neil had been awful, but everyone else had at least attempted cordiality once the king and queen showed their approval. Did that mean they were not still plotting against me? It hardly seemed prudent to decide that all danger had passed simply because my inheriting was less of a possibility now.

The lack of comfort and ease that I felt in my home kingdom left me angry and resentful. I wanted to continue to enjoy this time in my home, with my parents. I wanted to really, truly feel safe, but that felt impossible.

I tossed and turned deep into the night, managing only a few fitful hours of sleep. I woke when there was only a hint of dawn in the sky. I got out of bed but didn't bother to rouse Everly. Instead I wrapped myself in blankets and sat at my window, looking out on the landscape, which I knew would boast the deep green and bright pastels of summer once the sun had fully

risen. I tried to let the familiarity of the view calm me, but the strangeness of last evening wouldn't leave me be, and the more I looked out on the dim landscape, the more I started to see phantom shadows and danger.

I pulled myself away from the view, put on a dressing gown and went downstairs. It was close enough to sunrise that I knew some of the servants would be about. I went to the sitting room and found a servant to stoke the fire for me. Then I paced, winding the ties of my dressing gown around my hands and fingers, trying to contain all my nervous, tumultuous energy.

When John showed up in the doorway, his uniform jacket over his shoulders but unbuttoned in front, his appearance didn't even surprise me all that much. It almost made sense that my frantic thoughts had raced out into the early morning light, rousing him from sleep.

So I didn't bother asking him why he was awake. I just launched into my thoughts. "There is something wrong," I started without preamble. "I can feel it," I insisted, pressing the tips of my fingers into my heart.

"My lady, I understand—"

"Don't *my lady* me," I insisted, terrified that he would dismiss my worry. "And don't brush aside my concerns. I'm not being paranoid. Something is not right. Something—"

"I agree, Rose."

I blinked in surprise. He agreed? He wasn't going to insist that everything would be fine? That I should stay here and stand my ground?

"I mean, Lady Roslyn," he corrected himself, which was adorable even in these circumstances. "It all just feels wrong. There were many things that happened at the ball that have left me uneasy. Perhaps I was reading too much into things, but—"

"They just didn't make sense, right?"

"Yes. And I'm terrified of what that means." The tension he held in his stance was obvious.

I let out a sigh of relief. Somehow his anxiety eased my own, probably because it meant I wasn't alone. "Good," I said, almost wanting to sob as the weight of carrying my worry alone was lifted. "Good. Then we leave today?" My vulnerability seeped through into the smallness of my voice.

"Absolutely, my lady."

I nodded, took a careful breath through my nose and then blew it out. "Now can you please stop *my ladying* me and just hold me for a moment?" "Of course." He stepped forward and wrapped me up.

Why was it so much easier to breathe with him near? It was like my body could not be fully comfortable unless he was with me. And though such a feeling was frightening in and of itself, at the moment, it was exactly what I needed. The way my head fit just beneath his chin, my cheek resting against his linen shirt. The way his large hand covered my entire shoulder blade, warming me. His comfort enfolded me, and as I relaxed, I realized how tired I was.

Our lovely moment was interrupted by the sound of horse hooves.

I immediately stiffened and pulled back, tilting my ear toward the sound. John and I both looked to each other and then moved to the window, drawing back the curtains.

I watched the single rider approach, confused when I did not recognize him. Who would be showing up at this early hour if they were not known to my family?

The man slid from the horse, and I noticed that the satchel slung across his body was one commonly carried by messengers. He walked close enough to the house that we could not see him from the window, but we heard the door creak on its hinges, and a few moments later, he appeared again, jogging down the steps and climbing back onto his horse.

I turned to John, a question on my face. He ran his hands through his hair and pulled his shoulders back before taking several steps away from me and tilting his head toward the open door. "I believe you are about to receive a letter."

Sure enough, a few moments later, the butler stepped quietly into the room. "My lady," he said with a bow. "This arrived for you." He crossed to where I stood frozen to the spot and handed it to me.

"Did the messenger say anything?"

The butler shook his head. "Only that you needed to receive this right away."

"Thank you."

He nodded and excused himself.

I stared down at the folded missive. There was no name on the outside, and the wax that held it together was not imprinted with a seal. Before I could summon the courage to open it, John's hand gently took it from my fingers.

He carefully opened it and unfolded it, looking at it front and back. "What does it say?" I asked.

He shrugged and gave me a self-deprecating smile. "Can't read, my lady. I only wanted to be sure it was not coated in some foreign substance." He handed it back to me.

My weak reply was simply "Oh," because someone might be trying to kill me.

I looked down at the short note, and my heart sank.

Lady Roslyn,

I fear it is not safe for you here. I must advise you to run. I'm sorry.

Roslyn

I wanted to leave that very moment, but my mother clung to me. "I won't stop you from going, Rosie. I want you to feel safe, but please, for my sake, stay and eat. It's your birthday. I have breakfast all planned to celebrate."

My chin pulled back. It was my birthday. I'd forgotten.

"Then I can help you pack," my mother continued, a desperate quality to her voice that made my heart ache as she begged, "Just give me a little more...time."

Though everything inside me writhed at the thought of delaying my departure, I could not tell my mother no. She so desperately wanted to keep me with her, and I desperately wished that I could stay. I loved my home and I loved my parents, yet I could not love being here when it felt like death was stalking every step I took. Still, I could spare an hour or two. And who was to say that I would not be in just as much jeopardy on the road as I would be in this house? I swallowed at that thought. Would I ever, *ever* feel safe again?

As we sat down to eat, she did her best to smile throughout, but her eyes kept getting misty. "We never found time for you to play for me, dear. I've missed hearing you plucking away at your harp." Her brow furrowed a bit. "I'm surprised you haven't spent any time with it."

I smiled sadly. "Unfortunately, I didn't have access to a harp at Lisette's home."

Her shoulders fell a little. "I suppose not."

"And the one at Winberg Castle belongs to the duchess, and I dared not touch it."

Her face fell. "Have you played at all since you left?" I shook my head. Just one more thing that I'd lost.

She reached over and squeezed my hand, hard. It was a fierce gesture that spoke of sadness and regret and desperation. "I'm so sorry, Rose."

"It's all right," I said, even though nothing felt like it would ever be right again.

"It's not all right," she said as she sniffed and fought off tears. "You are so much the same, and yet so very different. All this time I've been imagining you happily playing a harp, taking solace in it, and now..."

"I found solace in other things. Especially at Bridgefield. Mother, I was happy there."

This made her smile, but her tears still started to fall. "I just wish you could be happy here. I wish we could all just leave Saldine and start new, but..."

She looked over at my father and he just gave her a half-smile, half-frown. I knew he wanted to give her that freedom, give all of us that freedom. But his money and livelihood were all tied to this land. If my parents left, they would have nothing.

"I'm too terrified to stay here. I'm sorry, Father," I said, my voice trembling with the struggle of wanting to give my parents what they wanted and yet being unable to ignore the immediate threat that sat before me. "I wish I could stay."

"Rose," my father said. "Have you considered that the letter was meant to chase you away?"

"Does it matter?" I challenged.

"I just wonder," he said gently, "if it's time to stop running."

Tears stung my eyes as all my fear reared up. "I'm not that brave." I wished I were. I wished I could stand and fight and claim my title with authority and strength. But that wasn't what my parents had asked me to do. They'd asked me to run, and I'd done just that for the past four years.

"Oh!" My mother tossed down the napkin she'd been using to dab at her eyes. "It's a shame you can't just marry a commoner like your father did. Then there would be no chance of you inheriting, and they might leave you in peace."

She took up her goblet and sipped at it, trying to contain her emotions as my father patted her other hand.

I sat there, frozen in place by her words.

My mother sniffed, sat up straight, and forced herself to smile. "We will figure this out," she said.

"I hope that's true," I muttered, but my mind had gone off in a completely different direction.

Why didn't I just marry a commoner? My father had lost his right to inherit when he'd married my mother because she could not legally rule at his side since she was not of the upper class. So then...why could I not do that?

After all, John...John. Was I completely mad for thinking that he might want to marry me? Was it insanity to think that I could be safe by asking him to sacrifice the life he knew?

The idea was too complicated and too wonderful and too delicate for me to know what to do with it. So I did my best to put it aside. Perhaps the idea had merit, but I would need to let it sink in at the very least.

I was grateful my mother had not given me the idea earlier in the meal. As it was, the three of us looked at one another, knowing we were on the cusp of goodbye. Then my father raised his glass. "A toast to Roslyn."

I smiled, and my mother quickly raised her own glass.

"I hope you know how extraordinary you are," he said, and I thought I saw tears swimming in his eyes. But then he lowered his eyes and drank.

After breakfast, I went up to my room and Everly helped me finish readying for our departure.

Everly remained behind to oversee the transfer of my trunks downstairs while I went down to the drawing room.

I entered and was surprised to find nearly every hard surface covered in flower arrangements. "What in the world?" I muttered to myself.

"They are all for you."

I turned. John stood in the doorway, looking as strong and steady as always. "Me?"

He nodded. "It seems you collected a number of admirers at last night's ball."

"Did I really?" I crossed to one bouquet and picked up the card that was propped in front of it. Some lord whose name I did not recognize had enjoyed our dance. I picked up another card and another. Each said pretty much the same thing. "Well, I suppose it is some comfort that I am now considered tolerable enough to marry for political gain," I muttered.

"You're also extremely pretty," John said.

I laughed, grateful for the levity. "I'm glad you think so."

He smiled, then sobered. "Are you ready to leave?"

I put down the card that was in my hand and nodded. "I am. My parents will be down soon, and I'm certain I'll turn into a puddle of tears as I tell them goodbye. But yes, I am ready to leave. I'm ready to be away from this place." This castle was so familiar, and yet the foreign worry of danger had gotten underneath my skin like an itch I couldn't reach. Worry was my close acquaintance, but feeling the danger inside my own home was new, and horrible. "Who do you think sent the note?" I asked. The question had been haunting me since it arrived, but no matter how long I thought on it, the only reasonable guess I could come up with was Everett. He'd been openly civil to me at the ball, bordering on kind. Would he really go against his family and warn me? I didn't know. It felt like I knew nothing at all.

"I don't know," he said. "It might be a scare tactic by one of the earls. Maybe they preferred it when you were gone."

"If only I could convince them that I'm not a threat."

"I think you hold more power than you know," John said.

I chuckled, forcing myself not to dwell on all the pain and gloom that waited to smother me. "And therein lies the problem."

While we waited for my parents to come down and for the carriage to be pulled around, I allowed myself the distraction of admiring the collection of flowers. I wished that I could truly enjoy what all these flowers meant. Not only had people tolerated my presence at the ball, but some gentlemen had appreciated my presence enough to send me these arrangements. I certainly didn't lament the loss of any relationship that might have come of them. Any interest they had in me would only be political. Plus, no one other than John had caught my eye last night, and my mind was too occupied with potential danger to even allow my imagination to go down that road. Still, I could at least take in their fragrance and let the scent of flowers clear my mind and calm my nerves.

"I think I'm going to have to plant more flowers at Bridgefield," John said from behind me.

I smiled over my shoulder at him. "Why do you say that?"

"Because you deserve more flowers. I've never met anyone who loves them as much as you do."

"I do love them," I said as I stepped to another arrangement and sampled the air above them, their fragrance bringing to mind damp greenery and sweet rolls. "But please don't change Bridgefield's grounds on my account." "Sorry, I've already made up my mind. There will be more flowers," he teased.

I appreciated what he was doing. He was helping to distract me, hoping that I wouldn't work myself back into a lather over the fact that I was once again fleeing for my life.

Except that wasn't the only thing I was worked up over. Half of me wanted to blurt out my marriage idea to John, see if he was mortified over the idea or if he found it intriguing. I cared deeply for John. In fact, I was fairly certain that I loved him. But leaping from maybe love to a life's commitment wasn't something I was prepared for. Not when suggesting it might scare him off altogether.

I shoved the thought aside and bent to put my nose into a bouquet of roses, inhaling deeply as I tried not to cry.

A sharp pain hit my nose and the back of my throat. I pulled back and coughed, pinching my nose to try to ease the discomfort.

"Are you all right?" John asked, his voice full of concern as he approached me from behind.

I pulled my hand away from my nose and looked at it. There was a fine white powder on my fingers. *What in the world*? My body listed to one side and my head spun, but when I looked back at the roses, I could clearly see that several of the blossoms in the bouquet were coated in the dust—and I'd just inhaled it.

No...how could I have been so stupid?

I turned to face John, unsteady on my feet, and held out my hand to show him the white on my fingers, like I was presenting evidence. My heart raced and the room around me blurred. It was done. They had gotten to me, and by the heaviness in my head, it was clear I wouldn't last long, so I wanted John to see the powder, to know what I knew. I wasn't sure he saw it, though, because the moment I turned to look at him, his face had gone pale and he rushed forward.

I stumbled to the side as my vision dimmed. "They knew I loved flowers," I managed to say as everything went black.

John

"Who?" I yelled at her unconscious form as I lowered her to the floor. Who knew? The earls? Their wretched sons? "Rose? Rose!"

I didn't have to call for help. It surged in moments later. Rose's father and mother, as well as Captain Sterling, came in as soon as they heard my shouts.

"Roslyn!" her father bellowed as he dropped to the floor beside her. "What's happened? Did she faint? Is she alive?"

I understood his chaotic thoughts.

"Rosie!" her mother wailed as she pulled Rose into her own arms. "Wake up, love. You're all right. You're all right," she said in the hysterical high pitch of a woman desperate to make her own words true.

"She was smelling the flowers, then she just collapsed," I said, hardly believing it myself. "Rose?" I called again, even though the dead weight of her body had screamed of unconsciousness at the very least. As she lay splayed across her mother's lap, I studied her face, noting the odd white power that clung to her nose.

Her father noticed as well. He touched it with his fingers. "What is this?"

I suddenly remembered the way she'd turned to me and held out her hand. "She tried to show me." I grabbed her hand and looked at her fingers. "It's here too," I said, holding them where her parents could see.

"You said she was smelling the flowers?" he asked.

"Yes." I looked up and over the heads and shoulders that blocked my view, trying to see the bouquets. "That big one, with all the roses."

Captain Sterling stood and went to look at the flowers. He touched one of the petals. "The same dust is on the flowers, Your Grace."

"What?" I shouted. "How could that be? We inspected each bouquet carefully."

"I don't know," he said. "It must have been inside the closed petals and only came out when it was disturbed."

"But what is it?" the duke demanded. "Poison?"

"Yes, or something of the like."

"We need a doctor!" her mother screamed, her breathing erratic as she clung to Rose's still form.

"Who would do this?" her father lamented.

Anger surged up inside me. "You know who would do this," I said sharply. "She spent the last four years away from you because you all believed her life was in danger."

He shook his head. "That was just a precaution. They wouldn't really—"

"Well, someone did," I said, fighting to keep my voice calm. I had no right to scold Rose's parents. They were clearly just as terrified and worried as I was. But their insistence that she return, that she put herself on display for the whole kingdom to ogle and judge, had led to this.

And I didn't even know what this was.

"Rose!" Her mother was shouting at her pale form as she continued to hold her.

"Violet, stop." The duke urged his wife to loosen her hold on their daughter. "Let's lay her flat on the ground, give her some space. Come on now. Help me lay her down."

The duchess did as her husband bid her, though her sobbing grief made her movements stiff and shaky. His Grace kept Rose's head cradled in his hand as he helped his wife lower Rose to the floor. Then he wrapped his arms around Her Grace from behind and gently pulled her back. They both collapsed on the ground, the duchess wailing as the duke tried to shush her.

I knelt down above her head and carefully adjusted Rose's body, trying to be sure that her head and neck were straight and that there would be no obstruction to her breathing. If she was breathing...

Was she breathing?

My hands gently cradled her neck and I stared at her chest, practically going cross-eyed as I willed it to rise and fall.

There. There it was. It was moving up and down. Wasn't it? Yes. The movement was small and shallow, but it was there. "She is breathing," I said, glancing up at her parents.

Her father let out a shuddering sigh and a tear streaked down his face. Her mother's wails just increased.

Captain Sterling stepped up with a damp cloth and started wiping the remaining dust from her face and hands. I wished I'd thought of that. We didn't want any more of the poison to enter her body. He handed another cloth to the duke, advising anyone who might have touched the powder to clean their hands.

Focusing my attention back on Rose, I noticed how well her dress fit her frame. Should we loosen her clothing? Would that make a difference? Gretchen had recently started wearing stays, and while she had complained a bit about their stiffness, she never indicated that it was harder to breathe, and she'd kept right on training with the rest of us.

But Rose was unconscious. Did that make a difference? Where was the doctor? "Did someone go for the doctor?" I asked, suddenly unsure if anyone had actually taken that step amidst all the chaos.

Captain Sterling answered. "My fastest rider has been sent. Hopefully he will return with the doctor in less than half an hour."

Half an hour. Such a short time, and yet it was an eternity in those moments as helplessness washed up and around and through me, threatening to smother my sanity and my breathing.

I tried to clear my mind enough to remember all the ways I'd seen Anne Lockley treating people with her herbs. What did my mother do for people when they were ill? Had anyone ever mentioned a substance that could take the life from someone so swiftly? Was it something the doctor or apothecary would recognize?

When the duke moved her up onto a couch, I helped him, and then I had to step back. As much as I wanted to be the one holding her hand and listening for signs of life, I had no claim on her. So while her parents pushed close to her and held her hand, I forced myself to stay back and watch, my eyes fixed on her chest as it rose up and down with shallow breaths, terrified that at any moment it would stop moving and none of us would be able to do anything about it.

I didn't understand it. The silent, still form lying on the couch felt separate from the woman I knew. The vibrant girl who danced through the woods, talked to birds without apology, and took in the sweet aroma of every flower she could get her hands on. That her love of beauty had been weaponized and used to hurt her felt like a violation.

Useless. That's how I felt. Completely useless. So I stood there and watched her breathe while my mind whirled and a torturous ache formed in my chest, tangled with fear, worry, guilt, and anger. Why hadn't we gone earlier? Why had her parents insisted she stay?

It was a relief when the doctor arrived, and I tried to stay out of the way as he worked and her parents hovered.

Eventually, the doctor sat back, looking stumped. "I've never seen this before. I've only heard of it."

"Heard of what?" the duchess asked in an anxious whisper, hanging on the doctor's every word.

The doctor turned his serious gaze on Roslyn's parents. "The effects of moon thistle. It only grows in the northern marshes, and the tiny white

flowers are poisonous. They slow the heart and cloud the mind. When brewed in a tea and taken in small doses, it can be used to calm hysterics or prevent the violent tendencies of mad patients—very useful. If too much is taken, it's an unpleasant but manageable experience. However, that's only when it's brewed in a tea or eaten right off the plant. But this is..."

"She didn't eat or drink it," I said. "It was a powder she inhaled."

He let out a defeated sigh. "Only recently, some apothecaries have been experimenting with drying and crushing the flowers, encouraging their patients to inhale it. But it was soon discovered that inhaling the moon thistle exacerbated the effects, leaving the patients unconscious for hours or days, or in some cases..."

"What?" the duke demanded.

But he didn't need to ask. We all knew what he was going to say. So when he quietly answered with one word—"dead"—I wasn't surprised.

The duchess cried out in agony, and I almost wished I could do the same.

"Your Grace," the doctor interrupted loudly, taking the duchess's hand in his. "Let me assure you. In those cases, death was almost immediate. The fact that Lady Roslyn is breathing now leaves me with every hope that eventually she will come out of the sleep on her own."

"Will it hurt her permanently? If she comes out of it, will she be the same?"

"So far as I know, there is no lasting damage, so long as the sleep does not last more than three days."

"But how can she survive? She can't eat or drink."

"It is hard on the body, but it can be survived."

I took his words and held them tightly, telling myself they were true. She could recover. She *would* recover. I paid close attention as the doctor explained what could be done for her. Tiny amounts of broth could be administered if it was done carefully. She would need to be moved occasionally to prevent skin sores from being in one place for too long.

The doctor agreed to stay in residence to watch over and care for her so long as he wasn't called away for any other emergencies. But first he would have to return to his home to gather what he would need.

He left us with assurances that her heart was beating steadily and that her breathing had been consistent.

After he left, her parents debated how and where to situate her, sending for the housekeeper and Everly to be consulted.

And I stood by, useless.

"I just saw the doctor leave," someone said from behind me.

I turned at the sound and discovered Lord Everett Malladon standing in the doorway, a bouquet of flowers in his hand. I was immediately on edge and moved to put myself between him and Roslyn's sleeping form.

"Is everyone all right?" he asked as he stepped closer, trying to see what we were gathered around. Then he caught sight of Roslyn and his face blanched. "Did she faint? Is she well?"

I wanted to read callous deception and trickery in his expression, but he seemed genuinely concerned and surprised.

"It's no concern of yours," the duke snapped at him. "She will be fine," he insisted, though his voice trembled. "She *will* be fine."

"But what's happened?" Lord Everett asked again. "Please, if I can help_"

"Help?" the duke raged, pushing to his feet. "Do not feign concern here. I've seen your family's hate for my daughter. Get out! Go!"

Though Lord Everett still looked confused, he did not protest when a guard stepped up and escorted him from the room.

"Do you think he did this?" the duchess asked from her place beside her daughter. "Was he here to gloat?"

The duke went to her and wrapped his arms around her shoulders. "I don't know, darling. I don't know what to think, but we cannot trust anyone outside of this house."

I stepped up to one of the other guards. "Do we have any further information about who delivered the flowers?"

He shook his head. "The butler said that every arrangement was delivered by a different messenger, none of whom he recognized. He couldn't remember who specifically dropped off any particular arrangement, and no one had looked or acted suspiciously.

I pulled my hand over my face, wishing I could hit something.

A hand touched my elbow, and I turned to see the duchess beside me. Her attempted smile was bleak and watery. "Would you carry Roslyn upstairs? She trusted you the most."

Her simple request and explanation made my eyes burn. "Of course, Your Grace."

Everyone else stepped back, giving me room to carefully push my arms beneath her shoulders and knees, lifting her into my arms.

I swallowed hard as I turned to follow her mother out the door. Roslyn was thin and light, but the dead weight of her was heavy because of what it meant.

Three days. So long as she woke in the next three days, everything might be fine.

I was glad for the hope the doctor had offered, yet it was such a thin tendril. I knew that hope could snap at any moment. Nothing was sure.

John

Her Grace and Everly situated Rose in her bed. Multiple layers covered her from the waist down, but only a thin blanket covered her upper torso. We had to be able to see the rise and fall of her chest; otherwise we had no way of knowing if she was still alive or not.

I stood against the wall, unable to help in any way, but I refused to leave. I expected someone to throw me out at any moment, but it seemed since I'd arrived with Roslyn and she'd insisted I stay, no one saw me as an intruder. I belonged here, watching over her. So I did just that.

I'd never been more grateful that I'd positioned myself as Roslyn's guard than I was now. Now that she was lying deathly still upon a bed, her face unnaturally pale.

If I had turned up as a footman or anything else, they never would have let me stay close to her. But as it was, my overprotectiveness made perfect sense since all they knew was that my job was to protect her.

Her parents and the servants discussed whether to stoke the fire higher in her room. Was she warm enough? Too warm? They whispered their questions to each other, like they were scared she'd wake up. Funny, since that was exactly what we wanted.

I blocked out most of the noise since there was already too much noise rattling in my own head. My thoughts were screaming. I kept running through every move I'd made, and questioned every decision I'd made. This was my fault. How could it not be? My thoughts kept swinging back and forth between being furious with her parents for insisting she come back in the first place and being furious with myself for not being vigilant enough. When all the flowers had started arriving, I'd been so distracted with my own jealousy that I had missed the danger. My ego had been wounded by the idea that so many worthier candidates were now vying for

her attention that I hadn't seen past that to the obvious. I'd spent enough time around Rowan and his family's herbs to know that plants could hurt as much as they could heal.

So why hadn't I seen it? Why hadn't I seen it? Roslyn had trusted me to take care of her, and I'd failed. And why hadn't Roslyn noticed the powder? She loved roses in every variety. Why hadn't she noticed they looked different?

Because of me. That's why. I'd been distracting her with my flirting. Selfish. Selfish.

I stood at attention as servants filtered in and out, as her parents debated and cried together and yelled at each other because of their grief. I watched when the doctor came in to check on her and said that nothing had changed and there was nothing to do.

The whole day passed that way. A servant brought me food at one point and I only ate it because I knew not eating would make me weak, and I refused to be weak. For Roslyn, I would eat. For Roslyn I would stay strong.

The shadows and sunlight moved through the room, making slanted patterns on her bed and hurting my eyes that were dry from all the staring.

Someone brought me a chair. I sat. Then I stood and let myself pace. Movement was important. If I let my body stagnate, that would impede my ability to defend. Defend against what though? She was already hurt. Still, I paced. I stood. I sat.

The sun went down. They lit candles and stoked the fire. The doctor came in, checked her breathing, and asked that a small bowl of broth be sent up. He and the duchess worked together to sit Roslyn up and then slipped tiny sips of broth into her mouth. They waited between each spoonful, watching her throat to see if she swallowed.

"If she ever gags or coughs on the liquid, we will have to stop giving it to her. This must be done with the utmost care and patience, else we could cause more harm than good."

I was grateful for his stern warning, and after only five spoonfuls, the doctor declared it enough and they tucked Roslyn back under the covers.

When the duchess decided that Roslyn should be changed into proper nightclothes, I left the room for the first time since carrying her here. If it had been anyone else taking care of her, I wouldn't have gone. The duke and duchess were the only people in this castle that I fully trusted. I took those few minutes to walk off some of my frustration and take care of my own needs.

When her door opened again, no one objected when I stepped inside. Roslyn's hair had been taken out of its fancy style and instead lay in a neat braid. She looked even more vulnerable, and I had to swallow down a lump of foreboding.

As the night deepened, the duke tried to get Her Grace to retire to their chamber and sleep, but she wouldn't go. The duke stood there, his eyes hollow as he stared down at his still daughter and his distraught wife. I'd never seen someone's eyes look so haunted.

He looked the way I felt.

Eventually, he placed a hand on the duchess's back, but she pulled away and his face became even more tortured. A few moments later, he left. I understood what drove him away. Uselessness could wear down even the strongest of men.

The duchess stayed at Roslyn's bedside, gently stroking her hand before deciding Roslyn's hand was cold and tucking it back under the covers. Then her hands fluttered, useless, over Roslyn's arms and around her hair before she fisted her hand and dropped it and her head to the mattress.

"How could I have let this happen?" she sobbed. "I was so anxious to get her back that I ignored the danger. How could I have been so selfish?"

I swallowed the words I wanted to say. She wasn't asking me anyway, and I harbored the same feelings. Why had she insisted on Roslyn's return? I knew that wasn't fair, though. I couldn't really blame a mother and father for wanting their child back.

The duchess's cries turned into keening sobs, and eventually Everly stepped up and placed a tentative hand on Her Grace's shoulder.

"You are distraught, Your Grace. Go rest. I'm certain John here could help you back to your chambers. I will watch over her." She looked to me with a commiserating smile.

I shook my head. "You can help Her Grace to her chambers. I'll remain here with Lady Roslyn." It probably sounded rude, but I wasn't going to compromise. Roslyn had trusted me to protect her, so unless one of her parents was in the room, I wasn't going to leave.

"I can't leave her," the duchess said.

Everly patted her shoulder. "You'll be no use to her tomorrow if you don't rest yourself. John is right. He'll watch over her, and I'll be here if she

needs anything, and the doctor will be in to check on her throughout the night."

The duchess just looked up and shook her head.

"Come, Your Grace," Everly said with a little more force, tugging on the duchess's arm. "Lady Roslyn will be taken care of. Come with me."

The duchess finally gave in and allowed Everly to pull her to her feet and lead her from the room.

Being left alone with only Roslyn's unconscious form was more disconcerting than I would have expected. The hopelessness of the situation felt heavier somehow when there was no one else in the room to hope with me. So it was a relief when Everly returned. She was efficient in her movements as she set up a pallet in the corner to sleep on after I'd declared that I would stay awake. The idea of sleep seemed mad. Perhaps because I had not exhausted myself with weeping as her parents had. Perhaps because I'd locked away all of my worry and frustration and so now it sat in my gut, loud and heavy and wanting to escape.

Everly's quiet snores were a comfort when they started, but they were also a stark reminder of how silent Roslyn's sleep was. Devoid of hums or snorts, twitches or turning. Very nearly devoid of life.

And when that thought lodged in my head, I couldn't keep it in anymore. My breathing quickened and I put a hand over my mouth to quiet my grief as I leaned against the wall and slid to the ground. Tomorrow loomed large and hopeless. Her condition was so unaltered thus far that it was hard to think anything would change, ever. So I wept into the silence, with only the gentle rhythm of Everly's snoring to remind me that life went on. Time kept moving.

My weeping continued, but eventually I shifted and crawled on my knees over to Roslyn's side. I carefully reached out a hand, terrified that when I felt her skin, it would be cold. But when I laid the backs of my fingers against her cheek, she was warm. Not too warm, but the kind of warm that reminded me of comfort, reminded me of home.

That one touch raised my spirits more than any of the doctor's encouraging words. My Roslyn was warm and alive. Too still, certainly. Too silent. But warm nonetheless.

Perhaps she would wake in the next moment, or the next hour. Perhaps I would be the one to see her eyes open for the first time. Perhaps I could

bring her parents the good news. My hope was back, and that was frightening in and of itself.

I was looking out the window as morning broke. I hadn't realized until now that Roslyn's room was in one of the corner towers of the castle. The view from up here was spectacular. Saldine was beautiful, especially from this vantage point. It was fitting. Roslyn deserved all the beauty the world had to offer.

The duke came to check on his daughter soon after the sun had risen. I watched as he approached with both trepidation and hope fighting across his features, but when he saw that she lay just as she had the day before, his expression sank into resignation. He fell into the chair by her bed, took her hand and pressed it between his own. "Wake up," he begged in a whisper. "Please, Rosie. Wake up."

A hand pressed to my shoulder, and I turned to see Captain Sterling standing beside me. "Go sleep," he said.

I shook my head and turned back to watch Roslyn. Roslyn, who wasn't moving. "I can't."

"John." This time it was the duke who spoke to me. "He's right. Go rest."

"I can't leave her." Yes, I trusted the captain—to an extent—but leaving Roslyn in his care wasn't an option.

"Yes, you can," the duke said with quiet authority. "Either I or my wife will stay by her side, and Sterling will stand guard. You've watched over her through the night; let us have a turn."

Maybe I could. His Grace had said either he or the duchess would always be with her. If that was the case, it might be all right. Plus, they had more right to be here than I did. I kept having to remind myself of that fact, because though my mind knew it, the rest of me bristled at the thought. Every piece of me knew that I belonged to her. I was hers and she was mine. My responsibility. My love. My life.

My everything.

What if I never had the chance to tell her that?

"You'll be no good to her if you don't sleep," the duke cajoled.

I let out a bone-weary sigh. He was right. I looked over at Roslyn one more time, willing her fingers to move or her head to shift, but nothing

changed. So I stepped away from the window and left her in the care of her father.

I stopped in the kitchens long enough to grab several biscuits and some dried meat, which I ate as I continued on to the barracks. My mind wanted to worry and fret about everything, but the longer it took me to fall asleep, the longer it would be before I could return to her, refreshed and ready to defend against whoever wished her dead. So I forced my breathing to slow and imagined the rushing sound of a swift river until my exhaustion took over and pulled me into sleep.

The beating of my heart was frantic when I woke, and I sat up, my eyes darting around. My eyes fell to another guard and he gave me a commiserating look. "No change," he said.

My heart dropped and then buoyed up. Though she was not awake, she was not worse off either. "Thank you," I muttered.

I readied myself and pulled on my boots, then strapped on my sword belt. The position of the sun suggested it was close to noon. I'd slept for nearly six hours.

I pushed through the kitchen doors since they were closest and hurried through the bustle of meal preparation, then continued down the corridor and up the stairs to her chamber. I nodded to the guard who stood just outside her door and entered.

The only sound in the room was the crackling of the fire, the duke's footsteps as he paced, and the duchess's occasional sniffs. Her Grace sat beside Roslyn's bed, her upper body draped over the edge of the mattress, her head buried in the crook of one arm as the other reached out so she could rest her hand atop Roslyn's.

The duke was in the corner, pacing in a tight circle. Captain Sterling stood when I entered and gestured for me to follow him out of the room. I did so reluctantly.

He went just far enough down the hall that we could speak without our voices floating into Roslyn's room. "I just thought you should be informed, as I inform all my men."

I nodded, humbled by the respect he was showing me.

"Lord Ravenna and his son, Lord Neil Ravenna, arrived nearly two hours ago."

Rage rose up and I opened my mouth, but he put up a staying hand.

"They were not granted access. They were not even let in the house. I and two of my men escorted their coach away from the castle and past the gates. I've now set up a watch at the gate so that no other uninvited guests are allowed past. I will not trifle with Lady Roslyn's life, no matter whom I insult."

I gave a firm and grateful nod. "Very good. Thank you for letting me know, Captain."

"You're doing good work here, John."

"Am I?" I suddenly felt my youth, and not in a good way.

"You don't think so?" he asked.

"I seem to have turned into a spectacular failure," I said to him, needing to say it out loud to someone.

He tilted his head. "In what way?"

"I am Lady Roslyn's personal protector. I came here believing that I could protect her from the threat at hand. And yet I was the one standing in the room, completely oblivious when she was poisoned."

"Hold on," he said, raising a staying hand. "Firstly, if you failed, that means we all failed. Secondly, she's alive, so even though it was a close thing, we didn't fail."

That wasn't what it felt like.

He must have seen my doubt because he kept going. "You were looking out for her, trying to protect her with very little information and even less experience than all the people here. But I?" His face pinched. "John, I've trained for this. I know these people, I know their ways. I was suspicious on purpose. I thought I was being vigilant enough. It was my duty. And I didn't see it."

He...had a point. And while I would forever feel guilty that I had not prevented Roslyn's terrifying ordeal, perhaps I did not carry all of the blame. Still... "I will never forgive myself if she dies," I said, knowing it was true.

He didn't argue with me or try to make me feel better. "None of us will. So we do the work." He clapped me on the back and departed.

I returned to my place watching over Roslyn. It still baffled me that I'd been accepted among these soldiers and treated as though I were fully capable. I would never be able to thank Falstone enough.

As my mind churned over the fact that one of the earls had shown up here, I took the chair and settled in for another agonizing day. It was much the same as the day before, but there was now an added sense of urgency. Lunch trays were brought up for her parents and for those of us who kept watch. The doctor checked in regularly. More broth was dribbled into Roslyn's mouth. The duchess rarely let go of Roslyn's hand.

Unlike his wife, who hardly left this room, the duke was constantly moving in and out, trying to gather more information, come up with other solutions, shore up security. He tried to murmur words of reassurance to his wife once in a while, but I could tell his hope was waning.

It was late afternoon on day two. Nearly half our time was up, and despair was starting to edge its way into the room.

When the sound of crisp footfalls outside the room drew closer, we all turned toward the door. Perhaps it was the local apothecary with answers, or a guard with information on who had done this to her.

Instead, a footman entered. "Your Graces." He bowed.

"What is it?" the duke asked, clearly impatient.

"His Royal Highness King Terius awaits you in the drawing room." My brow shot up. The king? Here?

The duke looked surprised, then shook his head in what I could only imagine was annoyance. Then he turned to his wife. "Violet, do I look presentable enough to greet His Majesty?"

She blinked up at him, clearly having a hard time concentrating on his question when worry for her daughter was consuming her, but she managed to climb to her feet. She straightened his shirt and ran her fingers through his hair in a way that spoke of ritual. It was the sort of thing she must have done for him a thousand times as his wife, but watching them now felt a bit like an invasion of their privacy when their manner and expressions were so broken.

The duchess finally looked up at his face with the ghost of a smile. "Handsome as ever."

He put a hand over hers where it rested on his chest and closed his eyes, the heaviness of grief weighing down on his eyelids. Finally he opened them. "I'll be back" was all he said before leaving.

I was surprised when the duchess turned to me. "John. I would like to know how that meeting goes, but I cannot leave her. Be my eyes, would you?"

I hesitated for just a moment, not wanting to leave Roslyn. But the duchess was entrusting me with a task. She would stay with her daughter,

and there was still another guard stationed outside the door.

Plus, would an assassin really be mad enough to make a second attempt on her life while the king was in the house?

I nodded, leaving the room and going to the servants' stairs at the back of the corridor instead of taking the large staircase at the other end. I made my way down to the drawing room and took up a position just outside the door as though I was supposed to be there. And since the duchess had told me to be here, I supposed it was true.

"She still sleeps," the duke was saying, his voice brittle. "The doctor says all we can do is wait and hope."

"And you're certain it was intentional?"

"The doctor identified the poison. It had been put on a bouquet of flowers delivered for Roslyn."

"But who would do such a thing?" The king was clearly appalled, which was some comfort.

"Do you truly want me to answer that, Your Majesty?" The duke's tone took on an edge as he asked.

"Of course. Why wouldn't I?"

"Because we've discussed this matter before, and you haven't been tolerant of my concerns in the past."

"Yes, but only because they always sounded more like wild accusations than real concerns," the king pointed out.

"And now?" the duke challenged.

Silence reigned, and I wondered how tolerant the king would be if His Grace kept pushing him in a such a way.

The king didn't respond, so finally, the duke spoke again. "I used to ignore it as well. I excused the abuse my child was subjected to. We all saw it happening. You and your wife saw it. The Malladons and Ravennas saw it. But I? I should have *done* something about it." His voice trembled.

"Children can be cruel," the king said with the kind of calm that grated on my nerves.

"Yes, I said those exact words time and time again. I spoke those words to Roslyn because I was more concerned with not making a fuss than with protecting my own child."

"You sent her away to keep her safe. That's not nothing."

"Yes, but only because Queen Talia warned us of the danger," the duke said, his voice rising just a little. "She didn't excuse it. She didn't brush it

aside. She had her men—your men—investigate. And though there was not enough proof to bring charges, she saw Lord Ravenna and Lord Malladon for what they were—a threat to the life of my daughter. Now, do you truly wish to stand there, with Roslyn on the cusp of living or dying, and tell me that my concerns are silly or exaggerated?"

"Careful how you speak to me, Weltshire," the king said in a warning tone.

"I mean no disrespect, my king. But it's an honest question."

A long sigh sounded from inside. I guessed it was from the king, because he spoke next. "I value the peace we enjoy in this kingdom. So when I encounter accusations that I cannot substantiate, it's dangerous to pursue them. I'm grateful Talia warned you. She was"—his voice was a bit strangled and he had to pause—"the very best of women. But our men never found anything to warrant action, and I stand by my decision."

"How can you say—"

"Let me finish," King Terius snapped. "That was before. But things are different now. Of course we will investigate further. Your men and mine will work together. You have my full support, and we will investigate until the perpetrator is found and brought to justice."

My own relief was mirrored in the sigh that I heard the duke blow out. This family had been left to defend themselves with no support for far too long. I just hoped the king was as sincere as he sounded.

King Terius didn't stay for long after that. He was the king, after all; I was sure he had things to do. But two of his soldiers stayed and were led away by Captain Sterling.

When the duke came out of the drawing room and saw me standing just outside, he looked surprised at first. I did not usually stray from Roslyn's side. However, his confusion quickly cleared and a corner of his mouth twitched. "Let me guess," he said. "My wife wants a full report."

"Yes, Your Grace."

"Why don't you go join the other soldiers? I'll be certain to give Her Grace every detail," he said as he left to go back upstairs, his voice holding just a little amusement. Then halfway up the stairs, I heard him mutter to himself, "Saints, I love that woman."

I was starting to understand why Roslyn was such a remarkable person. She had remarkable parents.

As the duke disappeared from sight, I headed toward the study, which the captain had turned into a temporary war room.

I hated that they called it that. I hated that this truly felt like war. When I'd gone against Magistrate Reeve with Rowan and the others, I'd thought that was like war. But I'd been wrong. No one had tried to kill us then. Capture us, yes. Hurt us, yes. But I'd never felt like my life was in real danger.

The room was chaotic and loud, yet there was an order to things. I stood back and listened, knowing I wouldn't have much to offer. I'd never done any investigating or interviewing.

As I listened, it became clear that there would be two areas of focus. Firstly, flower sellers and delivery boys would be tracked down. We still had all the arrangements that had been sent, so if we matched each delivery to the person who delivered it, we could narrow our search considerably. Then there were the apothecaries. The moon thistle had come from somewhere, and if we found the seller, we could find the buyer. Unfortunately, since the making and distributing of powdered moon thistle was looked down upon, the apothecary who supplied it might not want to admit to it.

"Offer money," the captain said simply when someone brought up that concern. "If someone seems reticent to speak, loosen their tongue with a few coins. Remember, I have no interest in capturing or punishing unwitting participants. A delivery boy in prison does the young lady no good. I want information, as much as you can get, until it leads us to the true culprit."

Men were dispatched, orders were given, and the room emptied for the most part. Dinner was brought in for the few remaining soldiers, and I took my portion. Just as I was finishing my meal, the duke came in to speak with the captain and I decided to return to Roslyn's room.

As I approached her door, I couldn't help the irrational hope that suggested I might open the door and find her with her eyes open. But of course they weren't. She was just as still as she'd been for nearly two days, and no answers were forthcoming.

Who had done this? Would they try again? Who could we trust? If she survived, what then? How could we ensure her safety? So many questions plagued us all.

And yet, even with all the questions pounding through my mind, all I cared about was seeing her open her eyes. If she would just wake up, we could handle the rest.

I sank into a chair and clenched my fists, suppressing a groan of agony, wishing for something, anything that I could do. If there were a foe in front of me that I could confront, I'd gladly do it. Give me a staff or a sword and point me toward her enemy and I would bring them to their knees.

Instead, I could only sit and watch and hope. But even that futile effort was interrupted. The duchess was no longer content to sit by Roslyn's side. Instead, she stood and walked, and tugged on the covers, and touched Roslyn's hair, and talked in a voice of false hope.

The duke returned when it was fully dark outside, and as soon as the duchess saw him, tears poured down her face. Despair filled his eyes as he placed a tentative hand on Her Grace's shoulder and swallowed.

"Come. Let us rest. I'm certain John will watch over her."

I nodded, knowing that anytime the duke and duchess were not here, I certainly would be.

"I won't leave her," the duchess said. "Not again. If this is to be her last night on this earth, I will not abandon her."

The duke's chin trembled, but he swallowed down his emotions for his wife's sake. "Very well," His Grace said. "Then we shall spend the night watching over her." He looked around, and I realized he was looking for a chair.

I quickly stood and moved the chair I'd been sitting on so that he could use it. He took it and placed it right beside his wife.

As much as I wanted to be there to watch over Roslyn, I looked to the door, wondering if I should leave them alone. The captain stood in the doorway and beckoned me out into the hallway. I complied, closing the door behind me.

Captain Sterling shifted his weight from foot to foot as he rubbed at his jaw and looked back at the door we'd just come through. "The duchess does not look well."

"She's not. She's falling apart, and watching it is making me..." I cut myself off and sucked in a breath as I pushed my fingers into my eyes. No need to admit just how affected I was by this whole situation.

When I looked back up at him, he no longer looked agitated. Instead he looked like he'd just figured something out.

"What is it?" I asked.

"John, you and I have spoken a lot about protocol and following the rules."

"Yes, of course."

"I have a feeling that your interest in Lady Roslyn is more than professional."

I didn't bother denying it.

He narrowed his eyes and bit his lips together. "How would you feel about breaking the rules if it meant protecting her?"

I couldn't help the smirk that pulled at my lips. I'd become a thief last year in order to save fellow villagers and restore order to Murrwood. "To be honest, Captain, I've found that justice sometimes requires breaking the rules."

He nodded, even though I could tell he was deep in thought. "Good," he finally said. "Come with me."

He set a brisk pace, and I was anxious to keep up. Something was about to happen. He was going to put me to work. I could feel it.

John

"This is Thomas," Captain Sterling said, gesturing to the boy, who I guessed was thirteen.

We were not in the war room. We were out in the garden, away from everyone else. Something really was happening, and anticipation buzzed in my bones.

"Tell him what you told me, Thomas."

The young man gave a stiff nod. He was working hard to appear unfazed, but being put on the spot by a captain of the duke's guard was intimidating, no matter your state or standing in the world. "My parents sell flowers. I deliver them. I brought one here the other day. Daffodils and bluebells."

So, not the bouquet in question.

"As I was leaving, another chap came to the door. He weren't the usual delivery boy. Most of us are boys, not full-grown men."

He was right, of course, but still, it was not so rare to have a man make his own deliveries. But I kept quiet, determined to hear the whole of his story and trusting that the captain knew what he was about.

"He was a big bloke. Bigger than you, even. Looked like a soldier, not a flower seller. And it was a big bouquet, full of roses."

My heart beat faster. Roses. The out-of-place flower-delivery man had brought roses.

"Most people who send romantic roses choose the red or white ones, but that bunch was pink."

My jaw dropped and my face went numb as I slowly looked to the captain. He nodded. We'd found a real clue. This boy had seen the man who had delivered the poisoned flowers.

"He doesn't know who they were from," the captain said, "but he remembers the man's face."

I nodded, trying to tell myself that was a good thing. Yet, I couldn't see the next step. If we couldn't connect this man with anyone else, then how could we proceed? How could we find him?

"John."

I pulled myself from my swirling thoughts and looked back at the captain. "Sir?"

"He doesn't know who sent them. But we have our own suspicions."

Of course. The earls. If we could match that man with someone who worked for the earls...but how?

"Now," Captain Sterling said with a firm look in his eyes. "As the captain of Duke Weltshire's guard, I cannot go snooping around the estate of a respected nobleman. I have no cause for such a search. Spying is not acceptable." His words were slow and deliberate. "I, myself, cannot ask this boy to accompany me to see if he could identify the man because I must stay within the bounds of the law."

My thoughts thunked into place, and suddenly I could breathe more easily. "Understood, captain," I said with a firm nod. "I'm certain you have more interrogations to conduct. I'd be happy to escort this young man off the property and see that he gets on his way."

The captain gave a satisfied nod. "An excellent plan. Best of luck to you."

He walked quickly away, leaving Thomas and me standing there in the dimming light. I took a single breath to give me courage and then turned toward the stables. "Come along," I said, trusting he'd follow me.

"Where are we going?"

"To get my horse."

He snorted. "I gathered as much. Where are we going after that?"

I looked around to be sure no one else was close by before answering. "Do you know where the Earl of Malladon lives?"

"Of course. Everyone does."

"Good, then I assume you know where Ravenna lives as well?"

"Course."

"Which estate is closer?"

"Ravenna is just over the hill." He pointed to the south.

"Wonderful." The less time it took to travel, the better. Roslyn's time was limited.

"What are we doing?"

I looked over at him. "Are you all right with bending a few laws?" He shrugged. "Course."

I smiled. His easy manner reminded me of Ansel. "We're going to trespass on the earls' properties and see if we can't get a glimpse of that man you saw."

"And if we do?"

"Then I'm going to try very hard not to maim the man then and there, and then we'll come back here and you can report that you know who that man works for, and that should give the king's men enough of a reason to storm the place and arrest the earl."

As much as I reveled in the chance to go and do something, my first attempt was a complete failure. We found Ravenna's estate. We snuck onto the grounds. We watched. But if the man who had delivered the roses was employed there, he never came out where we could see him. It was incredibly discouraging. I hated failing and wasn't used to it. In my small life, I had tried a fair number of things. I'd fought and won a few important battles. But this was different. It was so much bigger and more important, and I was failing.

It was well past midnight. The Ravenna grounds had been completely still and quiet for hours and Thomas had nodded off twice by the time I gave up. I would have stayed all night if I weren't so anxious to get back to Roslyn.

All was quiet upon our return, and the night watchman informed us that nothing had changed. Then he turned to Thomas. "Captain Sterling has told me you might be able to assist us. We'll pay you well for your time if you'd be willing to continue helping John here over the next couple days."

Thomas agreed readily, and then I convinced him to take my bunk and get some sleep.

"You're not going to sleep?" he asked, looking dead on his feet.

I shook my head. "I have work to do."

At least, I wished I had work to do. I wished for something more than the prospect of more agonizing waiting.

I returned to Roslyn's room and found her parents in much the same position as I'd left them—their eyes red-rimmed and tormented.

They stayed by her side for several hours after I returned, but when the doctor came to check on her the second time and told them that still nothing had changed, he encouraged them to sleep. There was still another full day of potential waiting, and they should rest while she was still breathing steadily.

As they were leaving the room, the duchess turned to the physician. "Doctor. Is there still reason to hope?" She would have looked stoic if not for the tremble in her chin.

"Yes, Your Grace. Every reason. If the sun sets on the morrow and she still hasn't woken, I will ask you to prepare yourselves for the worst. Until then, give her time."

She nodded and turned away just as twin tears slipped down her face.

Once the doctor had taken his leave, I sat in the chair the duchess had vacated and leaned forward, resting my elbows on my knees and running my hands over my face in agitation, over and over and over again until I finally let my face crumple and the tears gather in my eyes. Why hadn't she woken? Her breathing remained even, though a bit shallow. She had no fever. She'd taken in the broth without any gagging or choking. But her face was decidedly gaunt, no doubt from lack of food and water. And I could have sworn that her cheeks had even less color than they had yesterday. It felt like we all balanced on the tip of a spindle, not knowing which way we would fall. Would life win out? Or would death claim her?

With no true culprit to blame, I had no one to fight.

I couldn't fight an invisible poison, so I continued to sob quietly into my hands.

Until a small moan reached my ears.

My head jerked up. Had it come from Roslyn? I stumbled to her side and turned up the lamp so that I could see her better. She lay still.

I had heard it though. Someone had made the sound, so I stared so hard at her mouth, willing it to make a noise, that my eyes became dry.

Still nothing.

I closed my eyes as my tears renewed. What torture to think that my hope had been rewarded only for it to be false. I raised my head and pushed the heels of my hands into my eyes, clearing away the tears. Then I let out a shuddering sigh and reached down to pick up her hand. It was a little chilly, so I tenderly kissed her knuckles, then lifted the coverlet to tuck her hand underneath.

But then her finger twitched.

I froze. I could barely breathe. "I didn't imagine that," I whispered. "I know I didn't imagine that. Rose?" I said, leaning closer. "Rose, wake up." I waited, and waited some more.

Then her head jerked to the side just a little and she let out another little moan.

I dropped her hand and covered my mouth. "You're waking up." What should I do? What did I need to do? I couldn't think. I was too overjoyed.

People needed to know. "She's waking up!" I shouted and ran to the door, nearly running into the guard who had been stationed outside as he ran to answer my call.

We grabbed on to each others' arms and he looked past my shoulder through the open doorway.

"She is waking up!" I couldn't help shouting, even though he was right in front of me. "We must tell her parents."

"Yes, of course," he said and turned to go, but then stopped. "What of the doctor? Won't she need the doctor?"

"Yes, of course she will." I turned this way and that, my feet wanting to act but my mind unable to keep up. Should I send him for the doctor and I would inform her parents? Immediately, all my defenses rose up in protest of that idea. She was safe and waking up. I could not leave her now. "Go tell the duke and duchess. Then send for the doctor."

He rushed off to do as I asked, and I turned back into Roslyn's room, rushing to her side and taking her hand in mine once again. "Rose," I whispered. "Rose, it's safe now. You can wake up. Rose?" I brushed my fingers over her cheek. I just wanted her to come back. I wanted her to keep living a life where she knew she was loved and appreciated and *known*.

I whispered more reassurances to her, begging her to come back to me, terrified she would be snatched away again. My whole body shook as I leaned forward and pressed a kiss to her forehead.

She squeezed my hand.

I sucked in a breath of shock and pulled back to look at her just as the duke and duchess burst into the room.

She was waking up. My Rose was waking up.

This sleep felt awful, and I wanted to wake up, but I kept falling back into dreams that were dark and confusing. They were the sort of dreams where I tried to run but I couldn't. Or I was desperately thirsty, but drinking didn't quench the thirst. Everything felt wrong and heavy. I could feel the bed beneath me, but I couldn't wake up enough to move. Why couldn't I open my eyes?

Someone's voice sounded from far away, and it didn't sound like a dream voice. Was someone in my room, trying to wake me? The voice stopped before I could make sense of it. Then my hand moved. Or did it? Could I feel my hand? I thought...maybe someone was holding it. Why was it so difficult to tell? And if I was awake enough to know that someone was holding my hand, why couldn't I open my eyes? Why couldn't I move my hand? I forced all my concentration on my fingers and willed them to squeeze back. I wanted the person holding my hand to help me wake up!

Did my finger move? I thought it might have. Then the voice spoke again, so quietly I couldn't understand at first, but then I heard it. "Rose, wake up."

I'm trying! I wanted to shout, but all I managed was a tiny groaning sound.

Then he let go of my hand and the shouting started. Was that John shouting? Why was he shouting? Why couldn't he just help me wake up?

The shouting moved away from me and then was gone altogether. Had that truly been John? Was he here with me? Why? How? What had happened? I couldn't remember going to bed last night. The last thing I remembered was planning to leave with John, because I thought it was dangerous to stay. Someone had sent a note, warning me. We'd been preparing to go, and there had been flowers, which I had loved. I'd smelled them...

My heart started pounding and as I fought to open my eyes, my breathing intensified. Someone had poisoned me. A dust on roses. My body weakening. My vision going black.

Complete and utter terror.

I had to wake up. I had to find out where I was. I just wanted to know I was safe.

Then his voice was back, and a warm, gentle hand wrapped around my own. The fingertips were rough and calloused. John's hand.

Open your eyes, Rose! I commanded myself. Open them!

I wanted to see John and have him tell me it was going to be all right.

I tried again and again to make my eyes open, but the heaviness that weighed down my entire body kept them from lifting. Still, the steady pressure of his hand on mine allowed my heart rate and breathing to slow, and when he caressed my face, it seemed to warm me all the way through.

As his voice became clearer, it calmed me further.

"You're going to be all right," he said in a whisper as his fingers curled over my ear and down my neck. "You're safe. You can come back to us now. You can wake up."

The bed beneath me shifted, and then I felt his warm lips as they pressed against my forehead.

The safety, warmth and love that seeped into my skin seemed to lighten the weight, and I tried again to move my hand and managed to squeeze his fingers. Just a little.

A commotion rose up again, and I thought I heard my parents' voices, asking if I was awake. They sounded distraught and terrified.

I had moved my fingers. Surely, I could open my eyes. So I tried again and managed to flutter them open. It was only for a moment and they quickly closed again. But I kept trying, and after several heavy blinks, the world came into focus.

What a beautiful sight.

My gaze cleared and I saw John's worried face hovering above my own, along with those of my mother and father.

Mother's smile turned to tears and she started sobbing. "She's alive. She's awake." Then she opened her eyes and looked at me with overwhelming love. "You're all right now, Rosie. Everything is going to be fine."

Was it though? I wanted to believe in their reassurances, but I still couldn't move.

"My lady." A man appeared above me, crowding John out of my line of sight. "I am Dr. Harwick. Can you speak?"

I tried, but my tongue and lips wouldn't work right and all that came out were tiny hums that sounded like I was choking. I closed my eyes, frustrated.

"Good," the doctor said, surprising me. "That's good. It will take time for the effects to wear off completely, but that is a good start."

It didn't feel like a good start.

He put his hand on mine. "Can you move your fingers?"

"She was able to do it earlier," John said from somewhere.

"Good. Let's see if you can do it now."

It felt like trying to move a boulder, but eventually my finger moved.

The doctor grinned down at me. "See? You're coming out of it already. Now, I don't want you to try to do anything else right now. I don't want you to wear yourself out. As I said, it will take time. We'll just be patient."

My mother crowded close, stroking my hair and kissing my head. "You hear that, darling? It's going to be just fine."

The doctor took charge and gave out instructions. Everyone left the room aside from my mother, her own maid, and Everly. They maneuvered me slowly and carefully into a fresh nightgown and managed to get new linens on the bed.

After that, the doctor and my mother worked together to spoon small amounts of broth into my mouth. It was a little difficult, and the broth sometimes dribbled down my chin, but my mother seemed so thrilled that I figured perhaps I wasn't doing so badly. Also, I was decidedly famished and the warm broth tasted lovely.

"Now," Doctor Harwick said as I continued to eat. "I'm certain Lady Roslyn has many questions, and setting her mind at ease by giving her as much information as we can will help ease the burden on her mind. Soldier," he said.

John stepped forward.

"Can you give the lady a full report of what has transpired since she fell asleep?"

He nodded. I wondered why the doctor didn't ask my parents to explain, but when I looked over at my mother, her eyes were still wet and she looked fragile. Perhaps the doctor knew what he was doing. I moved my eyes back to John, wishing I could smile at him.

"You've been asleep for nearly two full days," he began, his voice firm but ragged. "Two mornings ago, the morning after the celebratory ball, you received flower arrangements from suitors and well-wishers. You were admiring them and smelling them when you inhaled a powdered form of moon thistle. The doctor tells us that this plant isn't usually dangerous, but when inhaled in its powdered form, it causes the deep unconsciousness that you experienced."

A noise of distress escaped my throat.

"I know," he said. "Someone did in fact try to hurt you. If you had inhaled more of it, you might not have survived."

"Does she really need to hear that?" my mother hissed.

I wanted to shush her and tell her I could handle it. I needed to know everything. Luckily, both the doctor and John agreed with me.

John continued. "We summoned the doctor, and he has been staying here to keep watch over you. We moved you to this room and made sure that you were always watched over and protected." He paused and seemed to struggle for words, looking away and shaking his head. "Either your mother, your father, or I were always here with you since we did not know where the attack had come from and who we could trust."

It was gratifying to realize how seriously they had taken everything.

"We stayed with you always, because we simply do not know whom we can trust."

So they didn't know who had done it? No perpetrator had been caught. Would they try again? How soon?

"Look," the doctor said, and reached out to touch my brow. "Your brow is furrowing. That is a good sign."

It didn't feel like a good sign. Nothing felt like a good sign. Someone had tried to kill me and nearly succeeded.

My father stepped forward, squeezing close enough to take my hand. "We will find whoever did this," he assured me. "We will."

So, someone had indeed tried to kill me, and almost succeeded. And still we had no proof of who it was, though I thought I knew.

I was grateful to be alive, but I was not comforted.

John

Her parents kept reassuring her and giving her as much information as they could. Roslyn kept trying to respond, but her throat seemed only able to produce half-sounds and hums. There was still so much fear and worry in her eyes, and those eyes kept darting to me. After a while, I recognized the pattern of her glances. When Roslyn's parents would say something reassuring that she didn't quite believe, she would look to me for confirmation. She wasn't ready to believe the threat was gone, especially when she still lay there helpless, and I was sure she suspected her parents of softening the news.

Luckily, they weren't. Their forthrightness impressed me, and it was easy to see where Roslyn got her own candor from.

The fact that she seemed to trust me to tell her the truth made my heart squeeze. But I happily stood there, nodding my reassurances whenever her eyes cut my way. But after her fears had been assuaged, it was the captain who caught my eye. He jerked his head toward the door and I reluctantly followed him out.

"Go get cleaned up," he said as soon as we were out in the hall.

"Oh, I don't—"

"It wasn't a request. You've been up all night. I won't try to force you to sleep, but go put on a fresh uniform at least."

He might have had a point, so I did as he said. I looked back into Roslyn's room one more time, assured of her health and safety, surrounded by her parents, the doctor, and the captain.

I cleaned myself up and put on a fresh uniform, but the moment I was done, I went back. Maybe I shouldn't have. Maybe I should have left her with her parents and just let them take care of her.

I had almost reached her door when it opened and her father came out, along with the doctor.

"You're sure she'll be fine?" the duke asked in a whisper.

I moved aside and stood up against the wall so they could ignore me as they spoke and walked.

"She's sleeping peacefully, *normally*," the doctor assured him. "This is a good thing. While it might seem strange that she would need sleep in order to recover from sleep, it's true. This is a natural sleep, not forced. If we were to shout, she would wake, which is why we should leave her in the quiet."

"Fine." The duke pulled a hand down his face, then looked back at the door. "I did try to get her to come," he said.

The doctor smiled. "I'm certain Her Grace will let Lady Roslyn rest."

The duke nodded and they continued down the corridor.

Roslyn was resting. Good. I told myself that was good. The doctor had said that was good.

I sat on the chair across from her door and tried to get comfortable.

Less than two hours later, the duchess came out of Roslyn's room. "I won't be long," she said, then closed the door. When she caught sight of me, still sitting across the hall, she seemed relieved. "You'll take care of her, John?"

"Of course, Your Grace."

She nodded. "Everly is with her, but I feel better knowing you're here as well."

She left, and my heart warmed at the knowledge that the duchess trusted me with her daughter.

After several minutes of failing to convince myself that I should stay in the hall and that Everly truly was trustworthy, I knocked on Roslyn's door, expecting to hear the maid call out, but instead the "Come in" that came was Roslyn's voice.

I opened the door and peeked inside. Roslyn was sitting up in bed and Everly was sitting close by, mending. I went further into the room. "You spoke," I said in astonishment.

She grinned. "I did. When I woke up after my nap, I felt much lighter than before. Look." With a tremendous amount of effort, she lifted both of her arms nearly to shoulder level before dropping them back to the coverlet with a grunt. She was breathing hard, but smiling. "It's definitely wearing off."

A massive sigh wooshed out of my lungs as relief made me weak. "I'm so glad." I started crossing toward her, thinking only that I needed to hold her in my arms and assure myself that she was well. But before I reached her, I caught sight of Everly in the corner of the room. I couldn't very well greet Roslyn the way I wanted to if anyone was watching.

Just a groundskeeper, I reminded myself. Yes, we care for each other, but I'm still just a groundskeeper, or ... soldier.

So instead I sat beside her and slid one of my hands close enough to be able to brush her fingers with mine. "Hello," I said as words suddenly failed me.

Her smile was bright and it shone across her face. "Hello, John." I took a careful breath and let it out. "I'm so glad to see you awake."

"I'm relieved to *be* awake. It was—" Tears crowded her eyes without warning and she had to swallow several times before continuing. "It was so terrifying. I kept trying to wake up, but I couldn't. It was like I was weighed down by sacks of flour. But then I did open my eyes." Her smile was back, and she lifted her hand enough to brush her fingertips across my cheek before it dropped back to the bed. "And you were there. And my parents were there."

I didn't care that Everly was in the room. I picked up Rose's hand and pressed it to my lips, then held it against my cheek. "Whoever did this to you is still out there."

She closed her eyes and nodded.

"So as soon as your mother returns, I'm going to go. There is something I need to track down."

She frowned. "Can't the guards do that?"

I shook my head. "Not this time."

"Will you be gone long?"

"Only a few hours. I promise."

"Good." Her gaze slipped down to my mouth and she tugged on her hand a little, trying to draw me closer. But before I could decide whether or not kissing her was a good idea, the duchess came in and rushed to Roslyn's other side. I dropped her hand and stood up. "I'm sorry I was gone so long," the duchess said, clutching Roslyn's hand.

Rose smiled. "You weren't gone long at all."

"And you're still improving?" she asked, nervous.

"Yes. I've told you, it keeps feeling better."

"I know, I'm just—" The duchess blinked hard.

Roslyn nodded. "I keep worrying that the heaviness will come back, but it's not. See?" She pointed her fingers toward the foot of her bed, and I watched in awe as her toes wiggled back and forth underneath the covers.

With Roslyn's attention fixed on her mother and the duchess obviously needing the extra reassurance that Roslyn was all right, I decided it was time to find Thomas and get on with our investigation.

I walked toward the door and turned back only long enough to catch Rose's eye and wave farewell, then I stepped out into the hallway.

I pressed my hands into my eyes, realizing that I hadn't slept in twenty-four hours. Oh well. This couldn't wait.

Halfway down the corridor, I saw His Grace step into the hallway and come toward me. I stepped aside and stood at attention, waiting for him to pass.

Perhaps I should have been used to his more personal approach to things, but I wasn't. So when he stopped and looked at me with what I could only describe as a fatherly gaze, my surprise likely showed all over my face.

"You're not taking care of yourself, John."

"I'll be well enough, Your Grace. I just had to be certain that Lady Roslyn was in good health."

"Your health matters too," he pointed out.

"She's all that matters," I blurted, and regretted the words instantly. They were too true, too vulnerable, and they caught the duke's attention.

His eyes narrowed as he studied me with calm intensity. The moments stretched, but still he just stared. "You're in love with my daughter, aren't you?" were the words that finally came out of his mouth.

I choked a little, but all I could answer was, "Quite, Your Grace."

"Hmm." His scrutiny intensified. It was disconcerting because he didn't seem the least bit angry, but the way he stared made it seem like he was sorting out some complicated puzzle.

"The morning that Roslyn was poisoned," the duke began slowly, "her mother made a comment over breakfast."

I waited, assuming this story would lead to an important ending.

"She said it was a shame that Roslyn couldn't simply marry a commoner the way that I had."

I reared back, wondering why he would mention such a random thing. Though I had admitted to being in love with Roslyn, it seemed an odd jump for him to mention marriage in the very next moment.

"The reason they are targeting Roslyn instead of me is because I cannot inherit. Marrying Violet made my inheritance unlawful. So if Roslyn were to marry a commoner..."

I blinked and suddenly wondered why no one had mentioned this before. Why hadn't she just done that in the first place? Once she'd been old enough, why not marry so far below herself that she made her inheritance of the crown impossible, and move on with life?

Granted, it wasn't that simple. She was only seventeen. It was cruel for me to expect that a young woman would sacrifice herself on the altar of marriage to someone she did not love. Even if it meant protection.

But still. It would be protection.

Had she considered it? When her mother mentioned it that morning, had Roslyn laughed at the silly notion, or had she stopped to think of it as a real option?

I would marry her. I would. This day. This minute. Not just to protect her, but because I could think of no greater joy than joining my life with hers.

When I finally looked back at the duke, he gave me a tight-lipped smile. "It's something to think on" was all he said before taking his leave and striding down the corridor.

My thoughts were a roiling sea as I went downstairs. Marriage could save Roslyn. Marriage to *someone like me* could make her safe. It was a tempting fantasy to dwell on, but I had other things to do. As much as I wanted to swoop in and insist that she marry me for her own protection, my conscience wouldn't allow it. I couldn't suggest she choose me for such practical reasons. No. First and foremost, I needed to capture the men responsible for putting Roslyn in such a position of fear. Then if she wanted to marry as an extra layer of protection, I would enthusiastically volunteer.

I went to the barracks and changed out of my uniform. Looking the part of an easily overlooked groundskeeper would serve me far better in my reconnaissance than having the Weltshire crest emblazoned on my chest.

I found Thomas out in the stables, helping out the grooms, of all things. "Thomas," I called to him. "Let's go."

He quickly dumped the brush he'd been using into the container at his feet and hurried over to me. His enthusiasm bolstered my own confidence.

I made quick work of saddling my horse, and then we took off for Ravenna's estate. Perhaps it would have been more prudent to go to the Malladon residence since our last foray onto Ravenna grounds had yielded nothing, but instinct told me to go back to Lord Ravenna's manor. Lord Neil Ravenna had been so openly hostile at the ball that I would feel foolish prioritizing any other suspect.

Thomas and I stashed my horse in a wooded grove not far from the house and made our way closer on foot.

"I can't wait to tell the lads about this," Thomas whispered when we reached a garden gate and crouched down.

I smiled, though it was grim. I was too focused to fully enjoy his adventurous spirit, but it certainly reminded me of myself at his age. "It will be a good story, I'm certain." I looked through the gate for any sign of movement. "Do you see anyone?"

"Not a soul," he said.

"Very well. Stay close and walk normally."

We set a pace that spoke of purpose but not hurry, and we wove our way through the gardens. I kept glancing up at the windows to be sure that no one was looking out on us, suspicious of a couple of servants who'd never been seen here before. If Ravenna was as guilty as I believed him to be, and we were caught...

Trespassing was dangerous enough. But trespassing on the land of a man who was willing to kill a young girl to further his political ambition—

I could not allow us to be caught.

We stopped at the edge of the garden and observed the comings and goings of servants and guards for several tense minutes.

"Do you recognize any of them?" I asked Thomas.

"No."

"All right," I finally said. "Follow close behind me. Look at every man's face and don't let yourself look guilty."

I watched him swallow and noticed that his expression was much more serious than it had been before. Good. He was taking our circumstances seriously.

"If you see the man we're looking for, don't say anything. Just tap my elbow and then discreetly point him out. Understood?"

He nodded bravely. "Yes."

My nerves were taut. There was more at stake for me than ever before, and I had to remind myself that I was up to the task. Doubt would not serve me.

I stepped out into the open courtyard and led the way across the grounds. At this point, all I could do was cover as much ground as possible in the hopes that our path would cross with the right man.

We went down to the stables, past the barracks, and then across the courtyard again. No one stopped us, which was a miracle.

Still, I stopped to look around and consider our next move, letting out a sigh.

"What if he's inside?" Thomas asked.

I pulled a hand down my face. If the man we were looking for never came outside, then there was little we could do. This task was not something I could accomplish with just force and tenacity. Luck played a large part.

"Let's work in the flowerbeds close to the house. I'll work and you can carefully look in the windows. Maybe we'll get lucky."

Or maybe I was wrong. Maybe the man wasn't here. Maybe we should have gone to the Malladon estate instead.

We worked our way along one whole side of the house, and Thomas only spied a handful of people inside, most of whom were footmen or maids.

When we reached the back of the house and the entrance to the kitchen, I hesitated. In my experience, the kitchen staff were familiar with *all* the servants of an estate, so showing our unfamiliar faces there would be a bigger risk.

"Come on," I said, leading the way to the herb garden that was set back far enough for us to possibly not be noticed but close enough that Thomas could still see the comings and goings.

I knelt with my back to the house and pushed my hands into the dirt. Thomas knelt close by but faced the kitchen.

After about ten minutes, Thomas seemed to stiffen. "A group of soldiers is coming."

That was good. I'd learned that the earls did not have as many soldiers at their disposal as the duke did, so this group would be a good portion of the soldiers among whom we wished to search.

"Any familiar faces?"

"Maybe."

My heart pounded, but I kept working, maintaining the facade.

"No," Thomas said after a moment. "It's not him."

I blew a breath through my nose as frustration crept in.

I moved a few paces to my left, pulling a few weeds and noticing how wide the variety of herbs was. Then my hand stilled. The plant I was looking at was some variety of thistle. And it had tiny white flowers.

Stars above, was this moon thistle? I quickly pulled a knife from my belt and cut off a small branch, then stuck it in my pocket. If an apothecary could identify this, then we might not have to find the man who Thomas had seen deliver the roses. This might be enough.

Suddenly, Thomas grabbed my arm and I turned to see what had caught his attention.

A man in a cook's apron had stepped outside and held the arm of a young boy, whom he was chastising. The man held a burnt loaf of bread in his hand and used it to bop the youngster on the head.

I flinched at the show of verbal and physical assault, but at least he had not struck the lad with something harder. "It's just a servant's quarrel," I said to Thomas.

"No, it's him," he said.

My eyes shot back to the man. "The cook? He's the one?"

"I'm sure of it."

I was on my feet before I knew it, my steps taking me toward the wouldbe murderer.

Thomas grabbed my arm, but I shook him off. "Wait, John!" His hissed words were enough to make me pause, even if his restraining hand wasn't. "You're not supposed to maim him, remember? We're supposed to do this right. Take it to the king's soldiers."

I heard him, but it was difficult to agree that it was the right course of action when the man in front of me had nearly killed Roslyn. I tried to tug my arm away.

"You'll get yourself killed. Which is none of my business, but you'll probably get me killed too, and that is my business."

I clenched my teeth, a growl of frustration escaping my lips. He was right. I was letting my anger get the best of me, and I had to get it under control. I took one more seething look at the wretch who had poisoned Roslyn and then turned sharply away. "Let's go."

My strides ate up the ground, but I reminded myself to blend in. I'd lost my head for a minute there, but I was thinking clearly again, and if I were to ruin our chances of catching the culprits at the last moment, I'd never forgive myself.

We reached the horse, and my chaotic thoughts pounded through my head as I pulled Thomas up behind me and then urged my mount in the direction of Weltshire Castle.

Dust kicked up behind the horse as I urged it faster down the lane, and when my mount skidded to a stop outside the stables, I didn't say anything as I tossed the reins to the groom. I had to speak with Captain Sterling. I hoped that some of the king's guards were here as well. This needed to be resolved. Now. Roslyn had suffered for long enough.

I burst into the war room and slammed my hand down on the table, leaving the branch of moon thistle there in the middle of it. "Moon thistle," I said, my breath heaving. "I'm almost sure of it. It has the tiny white flowers, it—"

"John," Captain Sterling said with authority. "Calm yourself."

I forced two breaths and then tried to explain more coherently. "I found that plant in the herb garden at Ravenna Manor. We need an apothecary to come and tell us if it's moon thistle."

I looked around at the stunned faces of eight soldiers, three of whom bore the king's crest on their uniforms. Good.

The captain stepped forward. "This was on Ravenna land."

"Yes. And not only that, but we saw him. Thomas recognized the man who delivered the poisoned flowers."

His eyes darted to mine, a look of triumph lighting his eyes. "Where is the boy now?" he asked, looking behind me.

"I—" I looked behind me as well and then winced. "I was not patient enough to wait for him to keep up."

Captain Sterling gave a shake of his head, but a corner of his mouth curled up. "Johannes," he said to one of the soldiers. "Go find the boy and

bring him here."

The soldier left, and Captain Sterling looked around at the others in the room. "Once Thomas confirms that the man we are looking for works at Ravenna, we will head out." He picked up the plant cutting. "I'd also like to know as soon as possible if this is indeed moon thistle."

"Let me see it."

I turned to see Doctor Harwick standing just inside the door.

He stepped forward and held out his hand. "Give it here."

Captain Sterling handed it over, and I held my breath while the doctor examined it.

"This is it," he said finally.

I pounded my fists on the table and then shoved my hands into my hair. "I knew it," I said through clenched teeth. I bent over, suddenly feeling lightheaded. We had answers, at least some of them. Bringing the culprits to justice might actually be plausible.

There was a general ruckus among all the soldiers as they expressed their disgust with the earl and started planning, and some pounded me on the back, congratulating me on a task well done. I sank down into a chair, my lack of sleep combining with the utter relief and making me feel too heavy to stand.

Johannes and Thomas came in a few moments later. Johannes clapped Thomas on the soldier. "He's identified the man who delivered the flowers."

That seemed to be the last thing holding everyone back, because only a few minutes later, the room was empty aside from the doctor and me.

"How are you, young man?"

I looked up at his concerned eyes, but I didn't know how to answer. "I should tell Roslyn the news." I tried to stand, but the doctor pushed down on my shoulder.

"I just came from checking on Lady Roslyn. She's sleeping again, which is good," he assured me.

"Right" was the only thing I could think to say. My mind felt slow.

"You should sleep as well."

Part of me didn't believe I'd be able to sleep when I knew that at this moment, Captain Sterling and the other soldiers were heading out to raid the manor and hopefully arrest the men who had wanted Roslyn dead. But the other part of me just wanted to sleep. "I suppose," I said, though the idea of walking all the way back to the barracks was daunting.

He helped me to my feet. "You've overexerted yourself, young man," he pointed out, and then, instead of leading me out the door, he led me over to the corner of the study, where a settee had been pushed back against one of the walls. "Lie down. You'll be better off after you sleep."

I gave in and curled awkwardly onto my side. I didn't really fit on this piece of furniture, but it was better than the floor.

Roslyn

My eyes fluttered easily open, for which I was grateful. It still felt strange to be so tired after being forced to sleep for three days straight, but I couldn't deny that I felt far better now than I had when I'd finally given in to sleep.

I rolled to my side, blinking in surprise. That hadn't felt difficult. I moved carefully, and though it was a strain, I was able to push myself up to a sitting position all by myself. As I leaned back against my pillows, breathing heavily, I smiled.

Only a few minutes later, Everly came in through the door that connected my room to the little chamber where she slept. As soon as she saw me, her eyes went huge. "Oh, my lady!" She rushed over with a smile, then lifted her hands to her mouth. "Did you sit up all by yourself?"

"Yes, I did," I told her in triumph.

"Oh, well done, my lady," she effused, and then set about adjusting my pillows and asking what I needed. It was lovely to have someone to share the moment with, but I couldn't help but wonder where my parents and John were.

After she'd helped me take care of my needs and rebraided my hair, she was helping me move to the chair beside my window when a commotion rose up below us. As soon as I was situated in the chair, I directed Everly to ask whichever guard was stationed outside my door to tell us what was happening.

She did as I asked, and the guard stepped inside. "Good afternoon, Lady Roslyn."

"What is going on?"

"I'm not certain, but there seem to have been some significant developments in the search for whoever poisoned you." "Developments?"

"Yes, my lady, and I'm certain someone—"

John stumbled into the room, his hair rumpled, as if he'd perhaps just been woken. But his eyes were bright and excited. "Roslyn," he said.

My breath caught, my heart thrumming, though I didn't know how much of it was caused by my anticipation of news and how much of it was caused simply by him. He wasn't wearing a uniform. Instead, he looked like the John I'd known for the past four months.

The soldier bowed and excused himself, and Everly went back into her own room, though the doors were left open.

"Tell me," I said.

He crossed the room and fell to his knees in front of me, gathering my hands in his and kissing each of them before looking up at me. "The earls have been arrested."

My throat seemed to close off in shock, and for just a moment I struggled to either breathe or speak. But then I let out a gust of breath and said, "What?"

"I went to Ravenna's estate. I found moon thistle growing on his property."

I blinked hard. It really had been the earl who had tried to kill me. Tried and nearly succeeded.

"One of the delivery boys had seen the man who delivered the poisoned bouquet. He came with me and identified him as one of the cooks. The soldiers went to investigate. The cook quickly turned on his master, and when Lord Ravenna was interviewed, he quickly turned on Lord Malladon."

My heart pounded and my ears felt muffled. "It was both of them?" I asked as I tried to hold back the tears that crowded my eyes.

"Yes."

My throat felt swollen. "Was there anyone else?"

He shook his head. "The guards are confident that it was only the two earls working together with a few trusted servants. No other noblemen have been named."

"But they've been arrested?"

"Yes. Both earls, and the servants involved."

"So, that means..." I shut my eyes and tears rolled down my cheeks.
"That means I'm..." My emotions swelled up, overwhelming me. I couldn't

say the word. It felt too unreal.

"That means you're safe," he said for me. "Finally."

I couldn't describe all that I was feeling. It was so tangled and complicated. Relief, disbelief, anger, sadness, joy, bitterness, hope. It was all there, and it was too much.

I leaned forward and fell into John's arms, laying my head on his shoulder and wrapping my arms around his neck. I squeezed him as tightly as I could, almost afraid that letting go would mean it wasn't true.

He rubbed his hands up and down my back, and I was so grateful to have him here to hold me together as I fell apart.

It was a long time before I let him go.

I was ready to get out of this room. I had woken early this morning. Now it was early evening, and I was tired of this room and most especially this bed. Knowing I'd been stuck in it, helpless, for several days made me despise it all.

My strength was slowly but steadily returning. I'd been able to stand and walk beside my bed for short amounts of time and felt I was ready to try walking somewhere else. Anywhere else.

"Where will you go?" my mother asked, worried, as Everly laced up the back of my dress.

"Out of this room. That is my only requirement."

"Why not just walk around the bed and then—"

"Because I want out of this room."

She gave a longsuffering sigh.

"Mother, for the first time in years, I don't have to worry that someone is going to try to kill me, and I want to enjoy that feeling. I want to go wherever I want, and I want to take up space and not feel bad about it."

This time she took a steadying breath and then smiled for me. "Very well. Take a few steps and then I'll get Sterling to carry you wherever you would like to go."

I knew my parents trusted Sterling, and he seemed like an excellent captain, but I didn't want a near-stranger holding me. "I don't want Sterling to carry me."

"Then who do you want?"

"John. I want John..." Stars, I'd never spoken truer words, but the lift of my mother's brow told me how they'd come across. "To carry me," I clarified.

Her pinched lips and raised brows spelled out her amusement. "So it's like that, is it?"

My cheeks suddenly burned hot.

"I suppose I shouldn't be surprised. He's clearly smitten with you."

"Is he?" I asked in a small voice.

"Rosie, the only time he left your side while you were asleep was when someone forced him out."

"He's a good man," I said to the ground.

"He must be to have caught your eye. You're too practical to fall for a scoundrel."

I looked up and saw her studying me with her hands on her hips. "I'm fairly certain your John is already waiting in the hall. So I will leave you here in Everly's care. I think I have something I need Sterling to help me with. So once I'm gone, your maid can help you to the door and then stay out of sight while you go out into the hall. I'm certain John can help you from there."

My eyes blinked in disbelief. My mother's eyes were shining with mischief and, dare I say, matchmaking. "I..." I didn't know what to say. It was a side of my mother I'd never seen before, and I quite enjoyed it.

"It's a good plan, is it not?" She looked proud of herself.

A short chuckle burst from my lips. "Yes. I think it's a great plan."

"Very good." She kissed my cheek. "Enjoy your walk, wherever you might end up. And don't push yourself too hard."

"I won't."

John

When the duchess had come out of the room a few minutes ago, I'd stopped my pacing and stood at attention as she spoke with Captain Sterling, and then they left together. Now I was back to pacing. As much as I wanted to rejoice at the fact that Roslyn was safe, I couldn't. Who was to say there weren't others out there? Others who would covet her position as much as the earls had?

Her door creaked, and I paused once more, surprised to see that it was Roslyn, all by herself, who opened the door and then carefully took a few steps out into the hallway, keeping her hand on the wall the whole time.

I wanted to run over and sweep her up in my arms, but the doctor had said the more she moved, the quicker she'd recover, so I clenched my fist and held my ground. When she looked up and noticed me, she smiled. "Don't look so worried," she chided.

"I'm not."

"Liar."

"Fine. I am. Permission to catch you if you start to fall?"

"How about you just walk with me, lend me your arm, and when I get too tired, you can carry me."

I was already by her side, wrapping her hand over my arm by the time she finished. "Your counteroffer is acceptable."

Roslyn looked up at me, and the way her eyes shone made me want to give her the world. And when she raised a hand and laid it against my cheek, I decided I'd gift her the moon as well if she asked.

Her smile was soft. "You're even more chivalrous than I thought."

I laughed and turned my head to kiss her palm. "Only for you."

She chuckled and started to walk. "I don't believe that for a second."

Our progress wasn't fast, but she moved steadily down the hall with delicate steps. We'd made it almost halfway to the juncture that met the next corridor when she stopped. "It's like trying to walk through thick mud."

I adjusted my grip, moving my arm so it wrapped around her waist as I waited for her to either recover or let me help. "At least the effects aren't permanent," I said.

"Can you imagine?" she asked, her voice haunted. "It could have been so much worse." She shuffled forward a few more steps, then stopped with a gusty sigh. "Can you carry me now?"

Finally. I lifted her gently into my arms, where she immediately settled her head on my shoulder. Then she sighed in a relieved and comfortable sort of way, and I had to force my breathing to steady. Laws, I wanted to kiss her.

"I think I've found a way to ensure no one will try to assassinate me again," she said as soon as I'd started down the hall.

My heart leapt into a gallop, and I forced a lump down my throat. "Have you?" My heart and mind raced, wondering if she'd been thinking the same thing I had. Had she taken her mother's suggestion seriously? Did I want her to? On the one hand, YES, I wanted to marry her, no matter the reason. But the more rational part of me wanted to marry her only because neither of us could stand to be parted from the other.

She cleared her throat. Perhaps from nerves? "Yes. You see, the reason everyone wants me dead—"

"Not everyone."

She gave an annoyed little sigh that made me smile. "Fine. The reason some people want me dead is because I will inherit the throne if everyone in the royal family dies all at once."

I chuckled just a little at her description, but the larger part of me was barely managing to put one foot in front of the other.

"But if I am no longer in the line of succession, I'm not a threat to anyone's vain ambition."

As much as I'd wondered if there were others out there, I didn't like that she was already worried about that. "Right, but now that the earls have been arrested, I can't imagine anyone else would be brazen enough or entitled enough—"

"Lord Neil," she said loudly.

I looked at her, and her lifted brow said she knew her point had stuck. Well, that shut my mouth.

"He may not have been involved in the plot to kill me, but he's still Neil and he still hates me."

I had to concede to that point.

"Since I believe Lord Neil is entirely capable of picking up where his father left off, the only sure thing I can do is to ask the king to strip me of any and all titles."

I was stunned. I'd been sure she was about to tell me her only recourse was marrying. Preferably me.

She frowned a little. "You seem shocked."

"No," I lied. "I just...I hadn't considered that was an option." And there was a little piece of my heart that was bruised, knowing that even after her own parents had suggested a marriage to someone like me, that wasn't the course she was taking.

"I'm supposed to be twenty before he'll let me make that decision, but I have high hopes that he'll make an exception considering the circumstances." She looked at me, her smile overly bright.

I nodded, knowing it was a good option. But if the king did see reason to strip her of her title, and she stayed here...my heart felt sore over the thought. "It's a good idea," I forced myself to say. "It would keep you safe." And that was the most important thing.

Roslyn

He was saying the right words, but his tone was off. "Yes, it would," I said, trying to sound optimistic and confident, but the little furrow between his brows was throwing me off. I'd been proud when I'd come up with my idea. It would accomplish the same objective as marrying a commoner would, but it wouldn't require John to marry me out of pity. Instead, if I had no title, then he might feel even better about marrying me someday. Our stations wouldn't be so far apart, and I would never have to wonder whether he'd married me out of a sense of obligation or because he really wanted me.

John paused at the top of the stairs. "I forgot to ask where we are headed."

I laid my head on his shoulder again, choosing to ignore my unease in favor of just enjoying the moment. "The gardens. I want to see my gardens."

The sunset was glorious. Something about nearly dying had made me appreciate so many things, and the sun was certainly one of them.

As much as I wanted to stroll through every path that wound through the gardens, it seemed a bit excessive to ask John to keep carrying me about. So instead we stopped at one of the benches and sat together. I was able to point out some of my favorite flowers, and each time I did, he would go pick one and bring it back for me. It made me ridiculously happy each time he did this, and the bouquet that accumulated in my hands was probably the best one I'd ever received.

"So, how does it feel?" he asked when the sun was mostly down and we were simply sitting, hand in hand.

"How does what feel?"

"Finally knowing for certain who has wished you harm all this time?"

I looked around for a few moments, trying to gather my thoughts. "I think I'm mostly sad. And...I'm actually even more hurt than I was before." It was a difficult thing to put into words, but I tried. "It's one thing to say I believe a person hates me enough to wish me dead. But then to actually have them try—" I swallowed the lump in my throat. "That's different. And I'm shocked how much it hurts even though I expected it for so many years."

"You have a right to be hurt."

"Yes, I suppose. You know what's strange though? I think I'm almost as shocked that Neil and Everett were not involved. Yes, the earls hated and ignored me, but it was Neil and Everett and the other children who tormented me. Perhaps I just thought if anyone were to hurt me, it would be them."

"That surprised me as well," he admitted.

I looked at him, and his expression made me laugh. "Are you still harboring jealousies for Everett?"

John winced, looking a bit chagrined. "Can you blame me?"

I put my hands on his face and urged him to look me in the eye. "You know there is nowhere else I would rather be than right here with you, don't you?"

His face softened and he covered one of my hands with his. "That's a feeling I know all too well." Then he dipped his head and kissed me softly, and we watched the sunset together.

I was impressed with how long I was able to sit upright without feeling tired. The heaviness, which I had to assume was a lingering effect of the moon thistle, continued to ease, and when we left the garden, I walked at a nearly normal pace across the grounds and into the castle, making it all the way to the bottom of the stairs before asking John to carry me. The way he tucked me close made me wish for more.

"Can we do this again tomorrow?" I asked.

"Yes," he agreed immediately. "But which part exactly do you want to do again?"

I smiled at the fact that he would agree so readily without knowing what I was asking. "I want you to meet me in the garden just before sunset." "I'll be there."

John

The next day, Roslyn was almost completely recovered, and two days after that, she said she felt back to normal. I rejoiced, while at the same time I wondered what came next. She'd said she was going to ask the king to strip her of her title, but she hadn't yet, and the idea of marrying her kept intruding into my thoughts.

But if the king did as she asked, and she was safe, where did that leave me? Would I take the horse that had been lent to me and return to Bridgefield? I wouldn't have minded that idea at all so long as Roslyn came with me, but now that she was here, with her family, what reason would she have to leave again if she was not in danger? And what reason had I to stay?

Roslyn

John and I weren't supposed to meet until later, but now that my strength and stamina had been restored, I took every opportunity I could to walk the halls of my home, and especially explore the grounds and enjoy my flowers. My flowers that were beautiful and safe and entirely lacking in nefarious dried plant dust that could kill me.

It was also nice not to have my parents hovering. I loved them dearly, but they'd been stuck to my side for too many days. I wasn't used to anyone hovering over me, and ever since I'd awoken, they wouldn't just leave me be. Luckily, I'd convince them I was well enough that they should go about their business. My father had many tenants who needed help and guidance on a nearly daily basis, so he had plenty of work to catch up on now that I was recovered.

And now with both of the earls firmly put behind bars, it felt like I could walk about without the horrid weight of danger pulling at my clothes.

John was another matter. When he was around, it didn't feel like hovering and I longed for more of it. I would have preferred he were with me all the time, but that was selfish. I had seen the camaraderie he'd built with Captain Sterling. John saw him as another mentor, much like Falstone and Marcus, so when he'd told me that the captain had offered to give him a bit of formal training, I had encouraged him to go. He'd assured me he would not miss watching the sunset with me in the garden, and I was determined to be patient.

As I was entering the gardens, I passed by the gardener, who was just setting aside a rake and some other tools, having finished his work for the day. He gave me a smile and a nod as I approached.

"I'm glad to see you out and about, Lady Roslyn," he said as he took the work gloves from his hands.

"Thank you. You are very kind."

"I got a new type of rose I've been training up over to the right," he said as he pointed down one path. "I think you'll like them."

"I'm certain I will. Thank you."

He dipped his head again and moved on, leaving me alone to breathe in my surroundings. I went to find the new roses first, excited when I saw them. They were yellow and red, in the same rose. The bottom of the petal was yellow, and then halfway through, it turned to red. How marvelous.

"Lady Roslyn," a harsh voice said.

I looked up and my heart dropped. Lord Neil was here in my garden, ruining my sanctuary, and he already looked angry. "Lord Neil, what are you doing here?"

"I was turned away at the front door," he said as though this was somehow an unexpected insult. "Some pompous butler asked me to leave as if I were—"

"What do you want, Neil?" I asked. I wasn't about to let him go on a tirade. I'd spent too many years being intimidated by this man, and I would not do it any longer.

His lip curled as his cruel eyes raked over me. "Still have the manners of a gutterling, I see."

"Do you really want to accuse me of ill manners while you are standing there sneering at me?" I hated this. I hated that he felt he could treat me this way. I hated that I fully believed he would hurt me at any moment. I had to protect myself. I had to summon help.

He moved closer. "You took everything from me!"

"I?" I asked in astonishment, backing away. "I took NOTHING from you. Your father tried to take my *life* and failed. Don't you dare try to blame me for his cruelty!" I continued to back away from him, maintaining my circle and raising my voice in the hopes that I would draw someone's attention. But if that didn't work, I would need a weapon. John had taught me that a staff could often be found. A branch. A broom.

A rake! I thought, remembering the one that the gardener had set aside with his other tools.

Neil pulled a hand down his face. "What am I supposed to do, Roslyn?"

I wanted to correct him and say *Lady Roslyn*, but that seemed ill-advised. So I continued to back away in the direction of the rake I'd seen.

"My mother hasn't stopped crying," he lamented. "My father is in prison." *Prison*."

"Yes. Because he tried to *kill* me, and yet you stand here asking for my sympathy?" Was he really so spoiled that he expected me to feel sorry for him?

He glared, keeping pace with me as I backed away but fortunately not trying to touch me. "You look perfectly fine to me."

"What did you expect, Neil? That your father could murder me and no one would care?"

"Yes!"

His snarled answer left me speechless.

"I expected that the king, who rightly stripped your father of his title, would appreciate it when we cleaned up the mess he left."

It was like a knife buried in my abdomen. How did this reprobate still have the power to hurt me with his words? I shoved that aside and lifted my chin. "I want you to leave," I declared with my head held high. John's voice was sounding in my head. *You have a voice. Use it.*

"I'm sure you do. You'd love to get everyone out of your way just to ensure your high and mighty position."

"I don't even *want* this high and mighty position!" I shouted. Surely someone would hear me! "I just want to be left alone!" I purposefully backed into the pillar that the rake was leaning against, reaching my hand behind my back until I found its handle.

He breathed in and turned his face in that dangerous way that people do when they're really angry. "You don't want it? Ha!" He raised his hand and pointed a finger in my face while stepping close. Too close. "You expect me to believe that—"

I pulled the rake from behind my back, held it firmly in both hands, and swung. First I jabbed the end into his stomach, then when he was doubled over, I aimed at the side of his knee, then braced myself and let fear drive me as I swung at the side of his head, all in quick succession, while saying, "Get. Away. From me!"

He crumbled to the ground and I dropped the rake, turned, and ran.

I should have called out for more help, but my terror made my breathing ragged and I couldn't find my voice. I'd just attacked Lord Neil. He'd deserved it, but that didn't make it feel any more real. I just wanted to get away. What if he caught up to me? What would he do if he caught up? And where was everybody else? I practically hadn't been left alone since the moment I'd arrived home, and now, *now* everyone let me be?

Out of nowhere, a body came at me from my right. Tight arms banded around me, spinning me to a stop.

I cried out and fought to get away, surprised when the arms loosened. "It's just me," the man said.

I spun to face him, shocked to see Everett there, his hands up at his sides. "Get away from me!" I screamed, backing away, my chest heaving. "Why are you here?"

"Why didn't you leave?" he asked, his tone disbelieving and his face tortured. "I tried to prevent this. I sent you a note, warning you away."

"That was from you?" I asked, astonished.

"Yes, but you were too stupid to take my advice, so now I have to do this." He reached for his belt and pulled out a knife.

My throat closed off and I froze. "Everett," I said in desperation.

Though his expression seemed to hold real regret, he still brandished the blade at me.

"You don't have to do this," I said in a bare whisper.

"We don't choose our family, Roslyn. I certainly didn't choose mine." He gripped the knife tighter. "But I am loyal to them."

"Roslyn!" someone screamed from behind Everett.

He turned to see who had shouted, and as soon as he did, I moved in. I took hold of the wrist and hand holding the knife, pulling it toward me as I

turned my back to him. Then I pushed my hips back and heaved him over my shoulder until he landed on the ground, flat on his back.

I backed away, shocked that I'd successfully performed the maneuver, and even more shocked that it hadn't felt difficult. I even ended up with Everett's knife in my hand.

Footsteps pounded behind me. Was it Neil coming after me again? I whirled to face the newcomer, the knife held out in front of me.

"Whoa," John said as he skidded to a stop, disarming me before I knew what was happening. "It's me. It's just me."

"John," I said in relief.

He was about to reply, but then he pulled me behind him. Everett was trying to climb to his feet, but John took a step forward and swung a fist straight into Everett's face.

Everett fell back to the ground, unmoving.

"You're lucky I don't break your legs," John growled at Everett's still form.

My heart continued to pound a frantic beat, and when John came back toward me, I pointed to the garden. "Neil. He's—"

"I know. Captain Sterling has him incapacitated." He spoke soothingly and took a step closer, reaching for my trembling arms.

I collapsed against him.

"How did you get away?" he asked. "Are you hurt? Did he touch you?"

He tried to draw back, but I clung tightly, needing to feel the warmth of his body pressed to mine, assuring me that I was well. "I'm not hurt," I said, trying to get my breathing under control. "And I didn't let him touch me." I spoke into his shoulder as he rocked me back and forth. "I found...a staff, and I hit him with it."

This time he succeeded in pulling back. "You hit him?"

"Three times, I think. With a rake. I just remembered everything that you had taught me. Or, at least enough." I dropped my head back to his shoulder as my limbs started shaking. "I don't ever want to do that again."

"But you did do it." He maneuvered to wrap his arm around me and lead me toward the house. "You're amazing." He kissed the top of my head. "You dropped Lord Everett flat on his back. I'm so proud of you, Rose, but I hope you never have a reason to do that again either."

He was able to hold me for only a few moments before my mother's cries reached us. I pulled back, hoping that I would have enough strength to

assure my mother of my well-being when all I wanted to do was snuggle up to John and let him take away my fears.

Chaos surrounded me and followed us inside. My parents, soldiers, servants. Everyone was rushing around, trying to figure out what was going on and how to help. The shock on my parents' faces when I told them how I had defended myself was gratifying.

My parents and I settled in the sitting room, answering the questions asked of us and demanding answers of our own.

"After the magistrate arrives and conducts his own interviews," Captain Sterling was saying, "I will personally go with him and escort Lord Neil and Lord Everett to the prison."

My mother blew out a shuddering breath of relief. "Thank you, Captain," she said in earnest.

"Of course, Your Grace. I'm just sorry that they were ever able to gain access to the grounds in the first place. It should not have happened. My most sincere apologies." He bowed low and my father excused him with a nod.

With everything that had happened, the thing I needed most was to be left alone, but it was more than an hour before I got my wish. I had to convince my parents that they could leave my side and go take care of meeting with the magistrate and the king's soldiers.

"Are you certain?" my mother asked after I'd insisted they go. "Your father could go. I'll stay with you."

"It's all right. Go."

"But-"

"Honestly," I interrupted her, "after so many years of being left to my own devices, I'm feeling overwhelmed by all the attention. It will be good for me to sit with my own thoughts for a time."

"Are you certain?"

"I am. I need the quiet to think."

My mother's chin lifted as she took in a deep breath. I almost felt bad for insisting she go, but this room was starting to feel too small, and her nervous energy and swirling fear were keeping me from finding a peaceful corner of my own mind.

"Very well." She patted my hand one more time and then stood, brushing her hands down her skirt and hesitating.

"Come along, Violet," my father prompted her. "We really must speak with the magistrate if we wish to put this day behind us."

"She shouldn't be alone," she whispered in protest.

"She asked to be alone, my dear. And John is here to watch over her."

She nodded reluctantly and they left the room, both of them looking back over their shoulders one last time before stepping out.

The door closed, and I only managed two normal breaths before my lungs tightened and my breathing suddenly sped up. I closed my eyes and pressed a hand to my mouth. The frantic puffs of breath rushed over my knuckles in irregular beats. It wasn't until that moment that I recognized how much I'd been holding myself together for the sake of my mother. But now the fear, anger and confusion that I'd been trying to ignore was bubbling up whether I wanted it to or not.

I hummed as I tried to control my breathing and gain my composure. I rolled my shoulders in an effort to ease the aching tension that knotted the middle of my back.

Something touched my shoulder, startling me.

My eyes popped open and I saw John crouched in front of me.

I swiped frantically at the tears that wet my cheeks. "I'm fine," I assured him with a wave of my hand. "I'm fine."

John put a hand to my cheek. "It's me, Rose. You don't need to pretend for me."

I smiled even as tears blurred my vision again. "She feels so guilty," I said.

"Who? Your mother?"

I nodded. "I think she is trying to make up for all the years we were not together. And it's been wonderful," I insisted. "It really has. But today..." I dropped my gaze to my lap and shook my head sadly. "I don't have the energy to make her feel better. Not right now."

"And you shouldn't have to."

"But I really am fine, and I don't want her to think otherwise."

"Yes, you are well..." He caught my eye before continuing, "but also you're really not."

His words hit me with force and resonated in my chest. And yet, logically, they didn't make sense. "I'm not?"

He shook his head. "No one would be fine after what you've been through."

"But I'm not hurt."

"Yes, you are," he said as he looked at me with concern and empathy. "You said so yourself after you woke up. Physically, you have no bleeding wounds, but wasn't it you who told me about the stories that hurt us?"

I arched my back against the tension there. John noticed and moved to sit beside me, placing a hand against the middle of my back. "What's the story here?"

There was tremendous comfort in his question. It gave me permission to put it into words. I leaned to the side and laid my head on his shoulder, closing my eyes as I started to talk. "That's the story of a girl who just wanted to be accepted, but who was hated instead." Tears dripped from my eyes. "That's the story of a prejudice that grew so large that the boys who should have been her friends turned into men who tried to kill her." The last few words were barely discernible as I crumpled into him and wept.

There was much I still wanted to talk about with John, but we were interrupted not long after my breakdown, and we didn't have a chance to spend time together until the next day.

I missed the days of running around in the forest with John. I missed our cozy adventure in the hovel surrounded by rain with no one watching or looking for us.

I was getting tired of acting as if John were only a guard to me, and since my mother clearly approved of him, I decided to stop caring that people were watching.

So I went to the drawing room and rang for tea.

A maid entered soon after with a tea tray, setting it carefully on the table in front of me and then looking up with concern. "Are you all right, my lady?"

I smiled at her concern. "I'm fine. Thank you."

She left through the open door, and I directed my attention to John, who stood by the wall. "Come sit with me?"

His brow rose. "Really?"

"You told me I don't have to pretend with you. So I'm not going to pretend that I don't want you to come visit with me over tea."

A smile raised the corners of his mouth, but I could see the concern that still tensed his features.

He crossed the room and sat beside me, leaning his forearms on his knees. "I haven't had many opportunities to sit and have tea in a fine room such as this."

"Perhaps we'll have to remedy that," I said, picking up the pot and pouring tea into both cups.

"So, what now, my lady?" John asked. "You yourself have vanquished your foes—"

"Hardly," I protested.

"No, no. There's no mistake. And it was a very impressive display of skill."

"And who do I have to thank for that?" I teased.

He grinned. "Me."

I chuckled. "Your humility is impressive."

"It is, isn't it?" he said in a haughty tone.

I let out a happy sigh and handed him a cup, which he held around the rim instead of by the handle. "You do realize that the fact that you were willing to teach me ended up saving my life?"

He looked over at me, and his brows dove into a V of worry. "I do realize. I'm just grateful it was enough."

"I don't understand why the king won't just take my title now," I lamented.

"What?"

"My father and I brought it up with the king again when we were discussing all of yesterday's...events. I am not of age until my twentieth birthday. So the king won't do it until then. Even though he can see the danger."

He searched my face. "You still feel unsafe?"

I nodded. "What happens if Nina decides she should take up the cause that her father and brother believed in? She could hire an assassin just as easily as her father did. Or perhaps she'll try to kill me herself."

It took longer than I would have expected for him to respond. "I'm sorry you still cannot feel safe here."

"Perhaps I will just go back to Winberg for the next two years." I took a deep breath. "The culprits have been found, and if I return to Bridgefield and impose upon Lisette and Edmund for a while longer, I should be

perfectly safe." And it would give me more time with John, and I desperately wanted more time with him.

"You wish to go back?" he asked.

I let out a sigh. "Yes and no. You know how much I loved Bridgefield. And while two more years of living under Edmund's roof is not appealing, I would at least feel safer there." I lifted one shoulder. "It's my best option."

He smiled faintly. "I suppose so."

I frowned. "You suppose so?" I turned more fully toward him, the tea forgotten for the moment. "It's a good solution, isn't it? Don't you think I would be better off if I weren't terrified all the time?" I paused to gather my courage before adding, "And you would be there."

He scooted closer and took my hands. "Yes. Of course. If you choose to go back to Bridgefield, we can do that. Anything that will keep you safe is a good thing. I want you to feel safe, to *be* safe. But...but your father..." He trailed off, looking uncertain and uncomfortable.

"My father what?"

"Your father mentioned another way, but..." He dropped my fingers and ran both hands through his hair hard enough that it pulled on the skin of his forehead.

Another way? The only other way I knew of was to get married, but would my father really tell John that? And since when was John nervous to tell me anything? "Just tell me, John."

His look was rueful. "I don't want to suggest it. I don't want you to think that you should do something that you don't want to do just to protect yourself. So if you don't want to resolve things"—he struggled for words—"resolve things the way your parents—then I understand and I hope you can be happy in Winberg, but if I could help keep you safe a different way...if it was something you wanted—" He took a breath and held it, then blew it out, closed his eyes and kept going. "If you wanted it, then I want it too. And I want you." His voice shook. "And if we both wanted...it, then we could fix it that way. We could..." His shoulders fell and he seemed to give up.

Now I was certain that I was in love with him. His bumbling, humble, disjointed, vulnerable monologue somehow made sense to me, and I loved him deeply for it. So I took his hands in mine and looked up into his eyes, which held both hope and trepidation. "First of all," I said, scooping up all my courage. "I want you too."

The breath he let out was shuddering. "You do?" I nodded. "I do."

He leaned in and caught my mouth with his, kissing me in a tremulous, vulnerable way that left my heart soaring and wanting more of him. I wanted more days and more conversations and more everything with him.

I pulled back slowly and framed his face with my hands. "Now, John. Let us understand one another, shall we?"

He nodded, keeping his arms around my waist. "Yes, please."

"As far as I know, the only other way to ensure my safety is to make it impossible for me to inherit by doing what my father did. That is, marrying a commoner. Is that what you were referring to?"

He nodded.

"Good. You see, when my mother mentioned it, you were the one I thought of," I admitted, which made him smile. "And I let myself hope for a little while that I could ask that of you, but then I started to worry."

"About what?" he asked, tightening his hands where they latched behind my lower back.

"About you saying yes only because you wanted to protect me. Or because you were obligated to save a helpless maiden."

He smiled. "You just brought Lord Neil to his knees and tossed Lord Everett over your shoulder. I don't think anyone would dare call you a helpless maiden."

I smiled at that. "Thank you. Still. I did not like the idea of trapping you in a marriage you didn't want. So I came up with my other plan. Because if we marry, I only want it if you want it as much as I do."

"I want it," he said immediately. "I want it more than...than...I can't even think of anything to compare it to. I just—" He stooped to kiss me again, and this time I let myself revel in it. Because this was starting to feel real. His words were starting to feel true.

He pulled back and kissed me lightly. One, two, three times. Then he tucked a stray hair behind my ear. "I love you so much, Rose."

A tear slipped down my cheek at the same time as I laughed. "I love you too, and I really want you to marry me."

"All right," he agreed.

His easy answer made me grin. Still, I worried. "But is it too soon?" I couldn't help asking as all my hesitancies rushed back in. "Maybe we should wait. Maybe we're too young."

"So?" he said, dipping his head so it was easier for me to look up into his eyes. "Commoners get married young all the time. The point is to take care of each other, work together, share a life. We could do that now, couldn't we?"

I nodded, elated. "We really could."

He slipped off the couch and onto his knees. "In that case, my beautiful, brave warrior princess, who will never be a real princess because she is going to destroy that prospect by saying yes to this question: Will you marry me?"

I laughed with joy. "I would love nothing better," I said before launching myself at him and kissing him without restraint. I was going to get married. John wanted to marry me, and the joy of thinking of a future with him made me giddy.

His arms wrapped around me and I pressed into his warmth, allowing the safety of his embrace to seep into the ripped seams of my tattered heart, stitching them back together.

John

My heart was in my throat when I told Roslyn's parents that we planned to marry, but I needn't have worried. Not only were they happy for our happiness, but I could sense the burden that lifted from their shoulders at the news. Because, although the earls and their sons were being brought to justice, Roslyn was right. We had no assurance that their cause would not be taken up by another noble, putting her life in danger again. We would all rest easier once we married and she thoroughly ruined her ability to ever inherit the crown.

Her mother was so thrilled, and even more relieved, that soon after hearing the news, she bustled out of the room, proclaiming there was much to prepare. That left us in the drawing room, sitting across from Roslyn's father. I could have sworn he looked ten years younger, and his immediate acceptance of me meant everything.

"Speaking of plans and preparations," Roslyn said, sounding hesitant.

"What is it, dear?" her father asked.

"Once we are married," she said, her fingers tightening around my own, "the threats to my life will cease, but then there are other questions."

"Such as?" her father prompted.

The hand that wasn't holding mine clutched at the rosy pink fabric of her skirt. "Where will we live?"

My lungs squeezed at the question. It was one I'd been asking myself, but I'd been too nervous to bring it up, knowing I had little to truly offer her by way of worldly wealth. I could provide for her, I knew that, just...not in the way she was used to.

"Don't misunderstand," she said, her eyes darting from her father to me and back again. "I don't mind living in a common home. I'm perfectly willing to work and..."

"Roslyn," her father interrupted. "I've made preparations."

Her brow shot up, but she didn't say anything.

"What preparations?" I asked, my palms suddenly sweating.

He gave me an understanding smile, probably well aware of my nerves, but he directed his answer at Roslyn. "Our primary goal was always to have you come home to Saldine and rejoin society. Your mother has always wanted you to have the opportunities and respect that she was denied." His expression was that of a man who knew he hadn't been able to give his daughter what he wanted. "I hoped you'd have those things too. But you know me..."

Roslyn smiled. "You're too practical to sit around wishing and hoping for the unlikely?"

His expression was rueful. "I've been working with your uncle, preparing accommodations for you in Winberg."

"You have?" Roslyn and I both asked in unison.

He nodded. "Granted, I didn't realize you'd be married, but this will work out well for you, I think. It's in the country. It's not large, just a house that would need only a few servants to run the place. I wanted it to be a refuge where you could retreat to if your return here did not go as planned."

Roslyn laughed at that. Her return had certainly not gone as planned. But then she sobered, and she swallowed. "There is a house waiting for us?" she asked with the same awe that I was feeling.

On the one hand, it seemed too much, and my pride bristled a bit. On the other hand, it made perfect sense. Of course this man would have made plans for his daughter to ensure her safety and well-being.

The duke nodded easily. "It won't be the inheritance you deserve, but—" "I don't care about that," she said immediately. "I just want to live in peace."

"Thank you, Your Grace," I managed to say, though the words weren't nearly enough.

"It's an honor to do it. Consider it a wedding gift."

I chuckled at that. The nobility certainly had a different version of gifts than I did, but I wouldn't complain.

"And where will this wedding take place?" he asked after a moment.

"Winberg" was Roslyn's immediate answer.

I turned to stare at her. "What?"

Her father chuckled and got to his feet. "I'll leave you two to discuss it. The location does not make a difference to me." He left the room.

I turned back to Roslyn. "I had assumed we would marry here," I said. "Why?" she asked.

I gave a little shrug. "Because...your parents are here. And don't you want everyone to know you are married to someone like me?"

"I will not deny your family the chance to attend our wedding."

"They would understand," I assured her. Of course I wanted my family present; I just hadn't assumed that was a possibility.

"I'm certain they would," she said, reaching out to take my hands in hers. "But there's no need. I would much rather marry you in Winberg than here."

"You would?"

She nodded. "I don't want my wedding to be something to check off a list so that people will stop wanting to kill me. I want it to be a celebration. Aside from my parents, there is no one here that I care about. But in Winberg? I want Lisette at my wedding. I want your mother, and Gretchen and Emeline and...all of them."

I smiled even as a sudden wave of nerves came over me. I was going to marry this woman—soon. It was exciting and there was nothing I wanted more, but it was also terrifying. She was entrusting her life, her body and her spirit to me. It was a sobering responsibility and one I did not take lightly.

"Very well. I will happily marry you anywhere."

She placed a hand on the rough stubble of my cheek and I sighed into her touch. "I don't know how I deserved this gift," she said.

I turned my face so I could kiss her palm, then said, "Your father loves you."

She shook her head. "I wasn't talking about the house."

"Then what did you mean?" I asked, scooting closer and loving the way she looked up at me with such unfettered love in her eyes.

"Finding you," she said, and I nearly felt weightless.

I leaned in and pressed my lips to hers, my eyes burning with unshed tears and a lump in my throat. She kissed me in return, her mouth moving over mine as her hands played in my hair. I pressed my palms against the laces that went up her back, and as she willingly poured her love into each kiss and caress, I started to believe she had healing magic in her touch. She

talked of the stories in our bones—the pains we held—but I wondered what sort of stories were being written in my body and heart right now. Surely if the bad could hurt us, then the good could heal us.

Roslyn

Just a few more days, and I would be married to John. Six months ago, my only friend was Lisette. Life certainly had a way of surprising me.

Now, not only did I have a collection of wonderful women who had practically adopted me, but I could even count Princess Marilee as a friend. I had sent letters ahead to both her and Lisette, explaining our situation, and Her Highness had been kind enough to extend an invitation for me and my parents to stay with her. She had recognized how uncomfortable it might have been to stay with Lord and Lady Rockwell, all things considered.

Staying with Princess Marilee was a unique experience. Not only was she lovely and welcoming, but she treated me and my parents as equals without asking anything in return.

I'd had several visits with Lisette over the past week. The first time I had gone to Bridgefield had been tremendously awkward as I explained to Edmund not only who I was and why I had never told him, but also that I was now marrying his groundskeeper. He had sneered a bit and flared his nostrils, but otherwise managed to be polite. I think he was just happy to be rid of me.

Lisette was able to join me at Sutton Manor one afternoon so that she could help me, my mother, and Princess Marilee in planning my wedding. There wasn't much to do but choose a pretty spot outside and decide what I should wear. Marilee was most enthusiastic about choosing the foods we would have to celebrate after. It was a lovely afternoon, but my favorite part was watching my mother as she conversed easily and comfortably with Princess Marilee. She was relaxed and enjoying herself, which was not something she usually experienced among the upper class.

Two days later, John and I were walking hand in hand through the woods. It was sunset and we were going to meet Jeanie and Gretchen for dinner at Bridgefield.

At least, that was what John had told me. Instead, we'd entered the kitchen to find it empty, but lit with candles.

It felt mysterious, though not ominous. "What's going on?" I asked.

John smiled down at me and squeezed my hand. "Just come with me."

We crossed to the door that led into the old wing, and I was intrigued when he pushed it easily open. "I wanted the last day of our courtship to end where it all began," he said, tugging me through.

"If that's true, then shouldn't we be out in the woods with you pressing me up against a tree?"

John sputtered a laugh and then pressed a kiss to my mouth as we both smiled. "Yes," he said on a chuckle when he pulled back. "I suppose that was the very beginning. But since I didn't know who you were, I thought I would start here, in the place where we truly met."

I leaned into his shoulder as we started down the corridor. "Very well," I said, my heart so light, I thought I might float away.

He carried no lantern, but we didn't need one. The corridor was lined with candles, lighting the space just enough for us to safely follow them into the room where he and I had hidden the first time we met. Except this time, the furniture wasn't covered and it wasn't dark. The hearth blazed with a fire and lanterns were lit around the room, making it glow with warmth.

The room was dust-free and the wood gleamed. A modest supper had been laid out on the small table that sat before the sofa. "This is beautiful," I said in a whisper, feeling as though the moment deserved quiet reverence.

"You're beautiful," he said simply and guided me to the sofa, where we sat close together.

I turned to face him. The food was lovely, I was sure, but I wanted to watch him. The softness of his expression nearly made me burst with gratitude. "Tell me something I don't know."

His smile was soft and full, crinkling the edges of his eyes. He took both of my hands and cradled them against his chest. "When you and I started out in this room, we were hiding in the dark."

I blinked as tears gathered in my eyes, knowing his words held layers of meaning.

"My dream for us is that we can build a life filled with light. And I never want you to feel like you have to hide away from anyone or anything. You brought so much sunshine into my life, and I want to do the same for you."

"You already have," I said, tears dripping down my cheeks. "I don't know that you'll ever be able to understand the warm, blazing light that you brought into my life. The way you chase away my fear and give me

strength. I know that the stories we create together will be filled with light and color. And yes, there will be darkness and pain along the way, but I'm willing to fight against it with you."

He leaned in and kissed me quickly. "You don't like to fight." I let out a laugh. "I know, but for you, I'm more than willing."

The End

To My Readers

Thank you for reading! If you enjoyed *Waking Roslyn*, please recommend it to others! All the advertising in the world cannot compare to real people recommending it to their friends. Please take a minute to leave a review (a sentence or two is great) for other potential readers on Amazon, Goodreads, or anywhere else. Word of mouth is essential for me to get the word out, so if you enjoyed reading Roslyn and John's story, tell a friend! Take a photo of the book and post it on social media. Tag me. I'd love to see my readers out in the world.

If you would like to receive updates and have access to bonus material, as well as get my FREE novella, please go to my website and sign up for my newsletter. Annetteklarsen.com

You can also follow me on Instagram (@AnnetteKLarsen) or <u>Facebook</u> (authoraklarsen). Happy reading!

Annette K. Larsen

Also by Annette K. Larsen

Books of Dalthia series:
Just Ella (Ariella and Gavin)
Missing Lily (Lylin and Rhys)
Saving Marilee (Marilee and James)
Painting Rain (Lorraina and West)
Keeping Kinley (Kinley and Rylan)

Dalthia Companion Novella *To Betray a King* (Faelyn and Bram)

Tales Of Winberg series:
Hooked (Cecily and Falstone)
Cloaked in Scarlet (Emeline and Hunter)
The Swindler's Daughter (Miriam and Rowan)
The Starling and the Hatter (Elise and Hatcher)
Waking Roslyn (Roslyn and John)
Untitled Book Six (Ansel and Gretchen)

Contemporary:
If I Could Stay
All Our Broken Pieces
All That Stands Between Us
Songs for Libby

You can find all my books on Amazon.





A Frog Prince Retelling By Annette K. Larsen

> Prologue Before

The Royal Palace Kingdom of Morwen

I sat upright in bed at the sound of scratching on my door. Despite the midnight hour, I hadn't been sleeping. I hadn't slept for three days, not since Prince O'Therion had laid siege to the royal palace of Morwen—my home.

The scratching came again, and I slipped from my bed and padded to the door. I didn't lift the latch but instead pressed my mouth close to the door and said, "Yes?"

"We've found a way out. Gather your things."

Though my heart was in my throat, I didn't hesitate. This was the outcome I'd been hoping and planning for, but I hadn't thought it could be a reality. Prince O'Therion and his men had kept me separated from my parents and sister, but our loyal servants had found a way to pass messages between us and coordinate our departure.

My escape.

It wasn't just a political coup from which we needed to flee; for me it was so much more than that. I was supposed to *marry* Prince O'Therion, but not like this. Our wedding had been meant to ensure peace between Morwen and Lyastra. His arrival was supposed to be for the purpose of celebrating the impending alliance between our kingdoms and personally getting to know one another better. O'Therion had decided on a different approach. He'd taken the castle by force, usurped my father's position, and *still* planned to marry me. But instead of the wedding happening four months from now, he intended for us to wed in three days. With the entire kingdom as witnesses,

he planned to wed me, thus solidifying his claim to my father's throne and forcing Morwen under his rule.

Grabbing the wrapper from my bedpost, I pulled it on and cinched it at the waist as I crossed to my wardrobe. I winced only a little when the sharp pain in my side reminded me of the large bruise above my right hip—a betrothal gift from O'Therion that he'd given me the day he arrived. I carefully opened the heavy doors, threw a cloak around my shoulders, and dug out the pack that I had prepared for this moment. There was no time for me to dress properly. I shoved my feet into boots and hefted the straps of the pack onto my shoulders before crossing back to the door and lifting the latch.

I pulled it open slowly, determined not to make a sound, and peeked out.

Gerard, a footman, stepped from the shadows across the hall and beckoned me out. I went silently, closing my door behind me, and let him take my elbow so that he could lead me silently through the dark castle.

We were near enough to the stables that I smelled the horses when I could hold my peace no longer. "Where is my family?" I had to ask.

"Each is being led out by a different route," he reminded me.

Of course I knew that. We'd all agreed it would be easier to slip away one at a time instead of all together, but it still made me nervous. Until we were away from here—until I no longer had the threat of being forced to marry the man who had taken our home and our kingdom—I would not be able to breathe easy.

Chapter One

The Royal Palace Kingdom of Tride Three months later

I walked the echoing corridors carefully, my feet shushing against the stone beneath my slippers. Sometimes I felt like a ghost in this castle—a specter that was unwanted but couldn't leave. I knew that this half-life was better than no life at all. Being a burden to my cousin, the king, was better than the alternative.

I walked to the railing and looked down at the bustle of activity in the courtyard below. Several servants walked behind me, but even though I tried to catch their eyes and smile, none of them acknowledged me. Sometimes I almost enjoyed the way I could walk about without notice. Today it grated against my nerves. Perhaps I should return to the rooms I shared with my family, but my father's simmering agitation and my mother's worry had felt stifling this morning.

"Princess Faelyn," someone called from behind me.

I turned. A servant was approaching with her head down, clearly uncomfortable with whatever task she'd been given.

"Yes?" I answered.

She dipped a curtsey when she reached me but didn't raise her eyes to mine. "King Jeshua asks for your presence in his study."

"Thank you. I will go there straightaway."

She curtsied again and scurried down the corridor.

I took a deep breath and straightened my spine. A large mirror to my left caught my eye. I didn't look like myself. My lifeless eyes seemed to belong to someone I didn't know, and yet they

were there, in my face. I turned away from the image and walked back the way I'd come. My hand went automatically to the necklace that hung around my neck. It had once belonged to my brother, but after his passing, it had been entrusted to me as the rightful heir to Morwen's throne. Of course, it was a mere sentimental bauble now. There was no throne for me to inherit anymore.

When I reached the stairs, I climbed to the third floor and then traversed two corridors before reaching the thick wooden door, flanked by two guards who stood sentinel outside the king's study. They barely looked at me. The utter indifference from the guards still felt strange. Back in Morwen, I knew all the guards by name. I'd grown up with them. I knew their families. They had respected me and obeyed without question, but there had also been a camaraderie between my family and those who were entrusted with our security. But these guards—Jeshua's guards—were cold. Just like the castle. Just like the king.

I knocked twice.

"Enter."

One guard reached over and opened the door so I could step inside, then closed it behind me.

My cousin, King Jeshua, looked up from where he sat behind an enormous desk. "Ah, Faelyn. Thank you for coming."

I sank into a curtsey, then held my hands delicately in front of me, the long sleeves of my gown draping down from my elbows. "Of course, sire."

He leaned back in his chair and studied me for several uncomfortable seconds. I hated it when he did this. Though he was my cousin, our relationship had always been polite and superficial at best, but in moments like these I wanted to roll my eyes. His father had died only last year, so not only was he a young king at only thirty-one years old, but he was also a new king. Despite that, he had more arrogance than almost anyone else I'd met.

Almost.

Prince O'Therion had been even worse, but he'd not only been arrogant but also vicious. Once he'd shown his true colors, it was terrifying to even be in the same room as him. He'd been cruel and violent, and he'd enjoyed watching the suffering of those around him.

"You are unhappy here," Jeshua said.

Yes. If I were honest, I would call myself bitterly lonely, but I couldn't say that to the man who'd taken me in. I owed him too great a debt. "No, sire. Of course not."

"You are," he said plainly. "Anyone in your position would be. You were forced from your home."

"We are safe and protected here." The last thing I or my family needed was for Jeshua to believe we didn't appreciate his hospitality. We were doing our best to gather information and allies from within Morwen, but communication was dangerous and slow.

Jeshua tilted his head just a little. "That is not the same as being happy. You believe yourself a burden to me."

Well. There wasn't much I could say to that. He was right.

"We are family, you and I. And as such, I consider it my duty and obligation to care for you, but I also know that your position here must be distasteful to you. None of us want to be a burden." He raised his eyebrows at me and waited. Apparently he wouldn't get on with whatever it was he wanted to say unless I answered out loud.

Fine. "You are right, Your Highness. I have no wish to be a burden."

He smiled, which was unusual enough, but there was something calculated in that smile that made my gut tighten. "I believe you and I can help one another. Though I cannot help your father reclaim his throne, I can at least give you the opportunity to earn your place here so that you might never feel yourself a burden again."

What a relief that would be. "I'm happy to serve the throne of Tride in any capacity." I'd always been good at diplomacy, and interacting with people of any station came naturally to me. Perhaps I could be an ambassador or help with negotiations. "What would you have me do?"

He pushed his thumb along his lower lip, considering. "There is someone who was once a trusted friend of mine. He knew my strengths and my flaws. He knew my secrets. But he betrayed me and now lives as a traitor in Dalthia. I have not slept well for seven years, knowing he has walked free, knowing he's never been held accountable for betraying his king. I want that situation remedied. And I think you are the perfect person to do it."

I blinked. That sounded like a large, complicated problem. "Remedied how?"

"Worry not. You'll only have to follow my instructions, and when you do, you will have the thanks of a grateful king. This is something I have agonized over for years, and if it could only be resolved, I would finally be able to rest easy."

"What would you require of me?" I didn't understand how I could do anything about a traitor. But if I could do this, if I could feel as though I'd really done something for Jeshua, I might start to feel less like an unwanted specter.

"You must travel to Dalthia and find this traitor." He paused before opening a drawer and pulling out a glass vial. "Then you must get him to drink this." He set the vial on the desk, where it sat, looking sinister as the deep-red liquid quivered inside it.

My throat felt swollen, and I had a difficult time swallowing. "What is that?"

"An elixir."

"Will it kill him?" I asked, terrified to hear the answer as I continued to stare at the bottle.

He was silent long enough that I looked up at him. His eyebrows lifted, his face arrogant. "It will make him suffer, as his betrayal has made me suffer."

That didn't answer my question. "Will he be maimed? Crippled?"

"I'm trying to right a wrong, not start a war. I assure you the elixir will have no long-lasting effects other than to ease my own pain."

That was good...if it was true. Surely it was true. Jeshua didn't want a war, certainly not with Dalthia. Although why he would wait so many years after the offense was a mystery. Certainly he hadn't wanted to get his own hands dirty, but why not ask one of his loyal soldiers to do it? "And if I were caught giving this man something that would make him *suffer*, how—"

"Don't get caught," he said bluntly, then leaned forward. "I must express in the most serious terms how important that is. Your first priority is to get him to drink that elixir. But nearly as important is that no one knows it was you. If you are caught, I cannot save you. And they must never know that you were a citizen of Tride."

That's why he'd chosen me. My skin was fairer than the more olive tones of Tride citizens, and my accent was different. Having been raised by a Morwenian father and a Saldian mother, I could pass as either. But that didn't mean I had any desire to play at being a spy. "How could I do such a thing?" I didn't want to do it at all, but I had an awful feeling that saying no might not be an option.

"I leave the how up to you. I didn't say it would be easy, Faelyn. But it *must* be done, and it must be done without anyone knowing who you are."

"How would I even find him?" I asked, trying desperately to make him see what a foolish, impossible plan this was.

"I have spies in Dalthia," he said easily. "I know where William is, and I know where he will be in three days' time."

Three days? He wanted me to carry out these instructions in only three days! "Why me? If you already have spies there, then—"

"I have my reasons."

"I don't know if I can," I admitted as I clenched my hands together in an attempt to stop their shaking.

"Faelyn," he said, his voice stern. "I'm not just your cousin; I am now your king. And your *king* requires this of you."

How could I do it? How could I not? Though he said the concoction would have no lasting effects, was that really true? Or was he asking me to kill a man? I closed my eyes, a tear slipping down my cheek, unable to agree but also unable to tell him no.

"Do you not wish for me to be your king?" he asked, a thread of sinister intent weaving through his words. "Would you rather return to your kingdom?"

I deflated and opened my eyes, seeing clearly that hard glint in his eyes. "You would send me back?"

"Only if I must."

How magnanimous, I thought with bitter sarcasm. "So then, if I do not do as you ask..."

"Then I must send you back to the Lyastran prince." He said it easily and with cold finality. "Please don't make me do that."

It had been three months since Prince O'Therion had laid siege to our castle, but still the echoes of fear from that time pulsed through my body each time I woke in the dead of night.

Having to flee to Tride, watching my father beg for asylum from his nephew had been degrading but necessary. Jeshua had granted us safety and a home in his castle, and I'd foolishly thought he'd done so out of familial obligation, maybe even a small amount of caring.

In the end, it didn't matter the motives. I was at his mercy. He'd laid out my options. I could deliver the elixir—which in all likelihood was actually poison—to the man who had betrayed my cousin, the king. Or he would send me back to Morwen, where I would be forced to marry Prince O'Therion and become his puppet queen.

My voice shook as I said in a whisper, "I will do as my king commands."

"Very good. Make your excuses to your family. Tell them you are going to deliver an important message for me, but tell them no more than that. A maid will be sent to pack a trunk for your journey. You will leave as soon as possible."

When I entered the suite of rooms that my family had been given as living quarters, my younger sister, Ciara, looked up from her sketching table and smiled at me, but it only lasted a second before that smile fell. "What's wrong?" she asked.

Her question drew the attention of both my parents. My mother got to her feet. "You're pale as milk, Faelyn. What has happened?"

"I, uh..." I closed my eyes and shook my head, trying to knock my reality into some semblance of rational thought. "I..."

"Come sit," my mother said, guiding me to a chair and sitting beside me.

She rubbed her hand over my back, and Ciara sat beside me, scooting in close so that she could grab my hand. The look of worry on her face tore at my heart. Twelve-year-olds were not meant to look so burdened.

I mustered a smile for my sister and managed to pull my words together. "I'm all right," I assured her, though it wasn't true.

"No, you're not. You're sad."

I closed my eyes against that truth. I would just have to hope that I could keep the depth of my sadness—my anger and shame—to myself. "You're right," I admitted, tucking a piece of her golden hair back into her bun. It was almost like looking at a reflection of my younger self. We were nine

years apart but so similar that no one ever had to wonder if we were sisters. "I am sad because I have to go away. Jeshua has—"

"King Jeshua," my mother corrected.

My nose crinkled in disgust. My mother was so afraid of being turned out by her nephew that she insisted we all treat him with the utmost deference. But now...now? Any respect or deference, or even tolerance, that I had for him was gone. He was blackmailing me, threatening me! So no, I would not call him by his title. "Jeshua has ordered me to carry out a task for him."

"What kind of task?" my father asked, coming closer.

"I'm to deliver a message to someone."

My father's eyes were immediately suspicious. "He has couriers and servants to do such things."

"He does not trust any of his servants. This information is so sensitive that he said he could only trust a family member." Lies, the first of many.

My mother shook her head. "But surely he does not need you—"

I brought my eyes over to meet hers. "He asked this of me, Mother. Shall I refuse the king?" She opened her mouth but didn't speak. Of course I could not refuse. She knew it as well as I did.

"How long will you be gone?" Ciara asked, her eyes blinking at the moisture there.

I pulled her into a hug, partially to comfort her and partially to avoid having to look into her sad eyes. "A fortnight." It was an overestimation. Traveling to Dalthia would take a couple of days at least, and I didn't know how long it would take me to convince a man I did not know to drink the unknown substance. "Don't worry. All will be well."

I truly hoped that wasn't another lie, but everything inside of me writhed. How had I gone from being an almost invisible presence here in the castle to being the one person Jeshua had chosen to do something terrible? I wanted to be invisible again—a ghost with no solid form. Instead I was just me...and that didn't feel like enough.

I walked back into Jeshua's study, dressed for travel, doing my best to remain calm and unaffected, or at least to appear so. But the moment I saw him, I felt the muscles in my face twitch with anger and disgust.

He glanced up at me, his face lacking any feigned good humor. He just looked at me, hard. I supposed he saw what he wanted, because he got right to the point. "Shall we discuss the particulars of your endeavor?"

"Yes, Your Highness," I said, biting the words in an attempt to control my anger and contempt.

"You will travel as a commoner since we can't risk you being recognized or remembered. And since the Dalthians tend to be suspicious of my people, you will tell them you are a Fraug."

"I'm to be a commoner from Valefraug?"

He nodded crisply. "Just as I said. The journey should take three days. A coachman will drive you, and a maid will accompany you."

"A maid?" I asked, trying to wrap my head around his plan. "But I'm playing the role of a common Fraug."

"The maid is not to serve you, Faelyn, but to serve *me*. She will be my eyes and ears. She will give you encouragement when you need it, and she'll be able to corroborate events as you tell them when you return."

I pulled my chin back. "You think I would lie to you?"

"Of course."

Well. At least he wasn't going to pretend about that.

"There's also the matter of your reputation to consider. If you are found out, I can't have your character slandered because you were without proper escort. You'd be no good to me sullied."

I winced at his crude words, reminded all too clearly of his threat to send me back to Prince O'Therion if I failed. But if I did this for him, perhaps my family and I could leave and go...where? I didn't know. But this situation made it perfectly clear that we could not continue to rely on Jeshua's "hospitality" any longer than absolutely necessary.

"So, will the maid be with me all the time?"

"No, that would be too suspicious. William, the man in question, is attending a house party. I've instructed the coachman to get a couple of rooms at a nearby inn. If it takes you some time to talk your way into the house party, you can stay the night there at the inn with the maid."

"How long does the party last?"

"Six days. Plenty of time for you to fulfill your task."

"All I have to do is put the elixir in William's drink?"

He nodded. "And ensure he drinks it."

"But it will not kill him?" I asked. I could not kill someone. Not even to save myself from marriage to a brute.

He narrowed his eyes at me. "I told you already. I am not going to start a war. And you'd do well not to question me further."

"I'm sorry, Cousin, it's just that—"

"King," he said with a sneer. "King Jeshua. Or Your Highness. Or even sire. Our familial relationship does not excuse you from the respect owed to me."

I swallowed my disdain and bowed my head. "Of course, Your Highness."

"This is not complicated, Faelyn." He walked up to me and held out the glass vial filled with the red elixir. "Pour this in his wine, be sure he drinks it, and come back here."

I took the vial, my fingers cold and stiff as I did so. "Understood, sire."

"Safe travels, Cousin."

I managed a nod, but my chin quivered as I turned and left the room, feeling more like a specter than ever before. Surely this wasn't real. Surely I was in some between-place where up was down and right was wrong, where the bit of safety I'd acquired was suddenly as elusive as smoke.

But no, this was all too real...

A princess tasked with poisoning a stranger.

A handsome gentleman distracting her from her purpose

You can find To Betray a King now on Amazon.



Acknowledgements

This book. I adore it. I really do, but there were points along the way where I was so sick of it. I didn't give myself as much time as I should have, and as a result, this little book and I ended up spending a little too much time together. I got sick of it. I wanted it to just stop being so demanding! Stop making me rewrite and rethink and add and subtract and and and... But I'm proud of what it turned into, and that end result, as always, is thanks to those who are willing to help me through the process.

So thank you, Kimberly, for alpha reading. Thank you, Cherise and Leiana, for beta reading. And thank you, Jana, for loving your job and loving my books enough to give them the tough love they so desperately need.

About the Author

I love words. I always have. In songs, in poems, in books, in movies—words move me. In my younger years, I dabbled in writing as a therapy and an escape, but I never expected it to become more than that. While deep in the depths of mommying several small children, I took seven years to write my first book, *Just Ella*. During that time, I taught myself how to write a novel through a whole lot of trial and error. Not the most time-efficient method, but it gave me an education I wouldn't have received from a class or a how-to book. Something about the struggle of writing without a formula or rules worked for me. I wrote for me. I wrote from my heart space, and I think that's the reason that *Just Ella* has found room in so many of my readers' heart spaces.

I write clean romance because I love it. I love the discovery of new love. I love the relationship building that's done with looks, words, brushing fingers, and tentative kisses. Jane Eyre is the hero of my youth and taught me that being true to yourself and clinging to your convictions will be hard, but it will bring you more genuine happiness than giving up on yourself ever can.

I am an extraordinarily happy wife, and a mother of five kids. I've lived in Utah, Arizona, Missouri, and Virginia, but my heart is now firmly ensconced in Idaho, where we've built a home and a community.

I love chocolate, waterfalls, pretty teacups, the sight and sound of ocean waves, and most especially my husband and my five beastlings. I love books that leave me with a sigh of contentment, and I aspire to write stories that do the same for my readers.